

From Heads to Hearts:
Digital Stories as Reflection Artifacts
of Teachers' International Experience

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The longest journey {people} must take is the eighteen inches from {their} heads to {their} hearts.

Introduction

On a humid Houston morning at the end of May, 13 Texas middle and high school teachers boarded a plane bound for China. The teachers and their two leaders from Texas A&M University were participants in the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad China Seminar 2010. When these travelers landed on a hot Beijing morning nearly 19 hours later, they had crossed many borders. Obviously, some were borders of time and space, but more profoundly, the teachers had crossed borders of culture, history, personality, education, and terrain. The experience transformed

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them as educators, learners, and people. Five weeks in China gave the teachers a new appreciation of both home and host countries, new tools and techniques to bring to the classroom, and knowledge of themselves and others as cultural beings. When they returned to Texas at the beginning of July, it was clear that, along with the 19-hour plane flight from Beijing to Houston, the teachers had taken the 18-inch journey from their heads to their hearts.

The China Seminar was organized by the National Academy of Education Administration (NAEA) in Beijing. The Seminar included classroom and field experiences, cultural tours, observations of teaching processes and lectures by experts in some aspects of Chinese life. There were several small group discussions and presentations involving local educators, comparing schools, pedagogy and curricula in Texas and China.

With the overarching goal of developing the educators' intercultural competence and enhancing their schools' world history/geography/cultures curricula, the Seminar provided opportunities for participants to acquire first-hand knowledge of the history, culture, language, geography, family structures, religion, education, economics, and politics of China and to dispel previously-held stereotypes and myths about China and its people. The participants visited cities across China: Beijing, Kunming, Nanjing, Shanghai, Lijiang, Shangri-la, and Huhhot. Here they came in contact with dominant and minority ethnic groups, many of whom are largely unknown in the U.S.

While every day in China brought adventure and revelation, the teachers understood from the outset that this was more than a "whoopie trip." They were expected to participate in research designed by the leaders to evaluate the impact of the Seminar. The leaders/researchers wanted to know how and in what ways participants in the China Seminar learned to cross borders, to understand and appreciate a culture, and to function in a setting that was so clearly different than their own.

As part of their research participation, teachers were expected to keep a daily journal of their experiences while they were in China and create a digital story based on a memorable event after they returned home. The researchers wanted to evaluate the impact of an international cultural immersion experience on cultural competence through analyzing and comparing the themes appearing in the journals and digital stories. The researchers were looking for depth of personal insight to determine if the digital stories actually became reflective artifacts that provided a window into the level of individual change that could enable the teacher-participants to navigate the multicultural landscape.

Theoretical Framework

There are many definitions of intercultural competence. Trask and Hamon (2007) defined it as the “ability learn from and relate respectfully to people of your own culture as well as people from other cultures” (p. 128). Taylor (1994) added the element of adaptivity, based on an inclusive and integrative world view. According to Landis, Bennett, and Bennett (2004), the intercultural skill set includes the ability to analyze interaction, predict misunderstanding, and fashion adaptive behavior. This skill set can be thought of as an “expanded repertoire of behavior—a repertoire that includes behavior appropriate to one’s own culture but that does not thereby exclude alternative behavior that might be more appropriate in another culture” (p. 149).

Because most American teachers work with a diverse student population, they need to be interculturally competent to interact successfully with their students (Leeman & Ledoux, 2003). Roose (2001) believes that there is a relationship between cross-cultural experiences of teachers and their ability to help all students in schools, regardless of their backgrounds and cultures. And the impact will outlive the classroom. “How teachers manage diversity in the classroom has a direct influence upon future citizens on a local, national and international level” (Dooly, 2006, p. 18).

One of the best hopes for developing cultural competence is through an international experience. Findings indicate that time spent abroad enhances intellectual growth, personal development, and global mindedness (Adler, 1974). Studies show that individuals mature and acquire a new understanding about life, culture, self and others when they travel (Landis et al., 2004). Travel offers a perfect opportunity for reflection and change. Piaget and Inhelder (1958) said that change occurs during periods of discontinuity and displacement, which would certainly happen during an international experience in a totally foreign culture like China. For teachers, this experience abroad will increase their intercultural competence and will combine to demonstrate a new understanding of their role and ability to interact with and teach individuals from diverse cultures (Mahon & Cushner, 2002).

Additionally, curriculum units and lesson planning are impacted by the prospective teachers’ international experiences. Teachers use their knowledge of the culture and values of their host communities to design materials and activities that are culturally responsive and validate the values, beliefs and experiences of the young people in their classrooms (Hayden & Thompson, 1998; Roose, 2001).

Practitioners, as well as researchers, believe that an international

teaching experience has positive, affective, cognitive, and behavioral impacts on individuals on both sides of the desk. In a study of the issue, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) advocated international experiences for all educators as a means to enhance school programs and student learning. The ASCD report recommended that teachers acquire cross-cultural experiences through overseas travel in order to see global education as an approach to teaching, rather than as an addition to curriculum (Rasmussen, 1998).

As important as it is for teachers to have an international experience, it is even more important for them to reflect on their time abroad. Freire (1970) stated, "Within the word, we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers" (p. 69). Thus, for teachers, reflecting deeply on the concept of culture is a critical first step for taking action in the diverse classroom.

Reflection has not always been considered an important instrument in a teacher's pencil box. For the most part, those who taught teachers and wrote about their education did not mention the importance of reflection. They expected teachers to practice their profession, not ponder it. Reflection was not generally associated with working as a teacher, which is often seen to "be primarily about the immediate present and instant pragmatic action, while reflection is perceived as a more academic pursuit" (Hatton & Smith, 1994, p. 36). Moreover, busy teachers do not typically engage in in-depth reflection. As Francis (1995) noted, close examination of one's own behavior does not occur automatically, and it is not developed without anxiety. In short, the attitudes and skills of reflection must be explicitly and systematically developed.

John Dewey raised the issue in his book *How We Think* (1933). He defined reflective thought as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 118). Through reflective thought individuals create new meaning that leads to growth and the ability to take informed actions. Dewey stressed that reflection involves communication within a social context and leads to the development of moral beliefs (1933).

Dewey's call for reflective practice was not taken up by education researchers in any significant number until the 1980s. Building on Dewey's seminal work on reflection (1933) and its subsequent interpretation by Schön (1986) and others, many educational researchers, including Daudelin (1996) and Hatton and Smith (1994), argued that reflection promotes a type of introspection necessary for professional growth. Daudelin (1996) further provided a definition of reflection that

explicitly captures its relationship to learning, "Reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through the development of inferences; learning is the creation of meaning from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behavior" (p. 39). According to Francis (1995), reflection allows teachers to inform, confront and reconstruct and to answer such questions as "What do I want to do? What does this mean? How did I come to be this way? How might I view/do things differently?"

Daudelin's definition suggests that reflection is integral to learning, when learning is defined as making sense of past experience in order to affect and understand future experience. Reflection on events leads to re-evaluation of experience, seeking relationships, finding patterns and meaning, and relating new ideas to prior knowledge (Boud, 2001). Reflection is a process of turning experience into learning; a way to explore experience in order to learn new things from it. "Reflection involves taking the unprocessed, raw material of experience and engaging with it as a way to make sense of what has occurred" (Boud, 2001, p. 10). Reflective action is bound up with persistent and careful consideration of practice in the light of knowledge and beliefs, showing attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility, and whole-heartedness (Noffke & Brennan, 1988).

Traditionally, teachers have used various written media, including journals, essays, portfolios, and narratives, to compose and reflect on their thoughts. Based on their review of the literature, Hatton and Smith (1994) concluded that writing tasks most frequently involve keeping journals and that these writing tasks foster reflection in teachers. Scholars believe that these written media allow authors to find their voice (Freidus, 1991) and foster reflection by deliberately making explicit their own thoughts and actions (Andrews & Wheeler, 1990; Wedman, Malios, & Whitfield, 1989). Reflection on attitudes, beliefs and behaviors provides the insight necessary for personal and professional growth.

While journal or diary writing may allow opportunities for reflection, there are difficulties associated with using such forms as evidence of reflection. There is the issue of whether the journal or diary is to be examined by others, and, if so, the manner in which entries are likely to be altered to meet the perceived expectations of the reader. In addition, many of the entries may be personal, reactive, emotive, and, at the time of writing, not at all reflective. This may be especially true if the author is experiencing a different culture, an experience fraught with emotion, insecurity and uncertainty. However, even when written in these conditions, journal entries can provide ideal substance for later reflection upon action, one source of information among others, which may be drawn upon for the creation of another reflective artifact (Bain, Mills, Ballantyne, & Packer, 2002).

Narratives may be better vehicles for reflection than diaries or journals. Individuals can explain, understand, and account for experience through stories, which are constructed through the process of reflection on experience (Blocher, 2008). "The process of re-evaluating experience includes relating new information to that which is already known, seeking relationships between new and old ideas, determining the authenticity for ourselves of the ideas and feelings that have resulted and making the resulting knowledge one's own" (Boase, 2008, p. 4). By emphasizing certain aspects of the story, authors reveal what they perceive to be the elements of greatest importance.

Davis (2005) stated that, through narrative, we learn from experience by reflecting upon the situation, declaring what it means, and distilling it into a symbolic form to be expressed and remembered. In recent years, the more complex narrative tool of digital storytelling has evolved. A digital story is based on a meaningful personal experience. It typically is three-to-five minutes in length and composed of a mix of images, video, music and text. The narrative is written and spoken by the author of the digital story.

Digital storytelling integrates the art of the narrative with modern technology (Lathem, 2005). Digital storytelling is an adaptation of oral storytelling; it utilizes multimedia tools to engage individuals in authentic learning experiences that provide real world relevance and personal value within a situated context (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Bruner 1996; Emihovich & Lima, 1995; Kearney & Schuck, 2006; Lambert, 2006) and "allows individuals to share their knowledge and experiences with others by telling a story" (Behmer, Schmidt, & Schmidt, 2006, p. 8). Unlike oral stories that are subject to varying interpretations and emphasis, digital stories become permanent artifacts that capture a specific moment in time, one telling of an experience, and stand as objects for personal reflection and critique (Lathem, Reyes, & Qi, 2006).

Constructing a digital story requires individuals to organize information, write and utilize technology, but, most importantly, authors must reflect on experience (Barrett, 2005). They must also select and sequence images that meaningfully support the message of the text, which requires critical awareness of the meaning they wish to convey. By emphasizing certain aspects of the story, authors reveal to an audience what they perceive to be parts of relative importance. As Hatton and Smith (1994) noted, it is not sufficient to assert that reflection is encouraged by a procedure or technique; rather means must be specified to demonstrate that particular kinds of reflecting are taking place. They called for scholars to move beyond self-reports to the identification

of ways in which reflective processes can be evidenced. This research indicates that the digital story provides such an instrument.

Methods of Inquiry

Participants

Participants in this study were 13 middle school and high school social studies and Mandarin language teachers who voluntarily applied and were accepted into a Fulbright-Hays Group Study Abroad China Seminar in summer 2010. All participants were Caucasian, four males and nine females, one of whom was Hispanic and carried a Mexican passport, with an age range between 28 and 68. There also was a great range of international experience. Five teachers had lived in and traveled to many parts of the world (although none of the social studies teachers had been to China). The others had not strayed far, if at all, from their Texas homes.

Procedure

During a 31-day tour of China, teacher-participants maintained daily individual reflective journals. Upon return, researchers scanned the journals and returned the journals to participants. Teachers were asked to construct individual digital stories based on a meaningful personal experience over the next four months. None had written a digital story before this assignment, and they did not receive any training on digital story design beyond a one-page instruction sheet.

Data Sources and Analysis Methods

Researchers used emergent coding and the causal comparative method to analyze the journal entries, the reflective responses, and the digital stories to look for patterns and evolving themes that related to an increased level of intercultural competence. To triangulate data, the digital stories were also evaluated using a modified version of Bradley's criteria for assessing levels of reflection (Bradley, 1995). The researchers wanted to determine themes in the China journals and compare them to themes of the digital stories to determine whether the digital stories actually allowed the participants to reach a deeper level of insight about whether they had the skills needed "to go sensitively and gracefully into a new culture" (Roose, 2001, p. 45) and to be successful in a diverse classroom.

Results

Analysis of Journals

Emergent coding of the journal transcripts resulted in identification of seven broad conceptual categories and related sub-categories related to an understanding of China and the impact of the Asian experience on teachers. The themes were:

1. Chinese culture: attitude toward life, food, housing, crowding, bargaining;
2. Ethnic diversity and collectivism;
3. Philosophy and religion;
4. Socialist market economy and governmental control: hukou system for determining residence, retirement age, land control, censorship; one child policy;
5. Education: schools, discrimination, test pressure;
6. Social welfare: health care, disability; and
7. Pollution: sanitation, industrialization and the environment.

These themes reflected participants' attitudes toward China and its people that denoted high appreciation for the culture, including history, arts, sciences, and crafts. They commented on the importance of interpersonal relationships and family ties, a sense of responsibility to others, an almost universal commitment to harmony, and a mindset that allowed Chinese passengers to endure a two-hour flight delay with equanimity and good humor. They also noted the environmental havoc fast industrialization is causing, the unwillingness of the Chinese to take risks or even move to Plan B, and the intrusion of the government in all areas of life. In the schools they visited, the U.S. teachers wrote in their journals of finding Chinese students to be better behaved and more respectful than their American counterparts. However, Seminar participants noted that the learning process was teacher-centered, test and text driven, with little encouragement for independent thinking. For the most part, these were changes in the participants' understanding of China and its people, which turned out to be different than what they had expected.

Evaluation of the journals provided some insight into the day-to-day experiences of the China Seminar participants. There were descriptions of memorable meals, such as a Peking Duck feast in Beijing and a Hot Pot dinner in Huhehot. Many participants mentioned the incredible

traffic jam on a highway in Inner Mongolia and the night we spent in tourist-style yurts. Most participants reacted to the horrors of the Nanjing Massacre Museum and the extravagance of the Shanghai World Expo. They enjoyed ethnic musical performances in Lijiang and shopping at the Pearl Market in Beijing. The journals were for the most part catalogues of daily events. One participant ended her journal by saying "...now the real work begins."

The real work for most of the participants was reflection, and it was revealed in the digital stories.

Analysis of the Digital Stories

The digital stories from the China Seminar were examined using a modified version of Bradley's (1995) three-level framework for evaluating levels of reflection. Bradley's original model was based on reflections of a service-learning project; the modifications made for this study better suited the evaluation of an intercultural experience. The levels were:

Level 1: Descriptive, observations without insight:

- A. Gives examples of observed behaviors or characteristics of the setting, the people and the author, but provides no insight into reasons behind the observation;
- B. Observations tend to be one-dimensional and conversational or unassimilated repetitions of what others have heard or said;
- C. Tends to focus on just one aspect of the situation;
- D. Does not examine personal beliefs, which then are treated as "hard" evidence;
- E. May acknowledge different perspectives, but does not discriminate among them.

Level 2: Interpretive and emotive, single perspective:

- A. Observations are fairly thorough, although generally not placed in a broader context;
- B. Provides a cogent critique from one perspective, but fails to see the broader system and other factors which may make change difficult;
- C. Uses both unsupported personal belief and evidence, but is beginning to be able to see the difference between them;
- D. Perceives legitimate differences of viewpoint;

E. Demonstrates a nascent ability to interpret evidence.

Level 3: Active, situations viewed from many perspectives; actions dependent on context:

A. Views things from multiple perspectives; able to observe multiple aspects of the situation and place them in context;

B. Perceives and evaluates conflicting goals within and among individuals;

C. Recognizes that actions are situationally-dependent and understands many factors affect choice;

D. Makes appropriate assessment of the decisions made by others and self (Bradley, 1995).

Three raters ranked the digital stories, focusing particularly on the evidence of insights about China and Chinese culture, indications of multiple perspectives, and suggestions of new meaning derived from the reflective process. As reported in Table 1, the raters placed four of the 13 digital stories at Level One, six at Level Two, and three at Level Three. The four at Level One were purely descriptive and told from only one perspective, that of the narrator. *The Pecking Order*, for example, reports on the author's attempt to cross a busy street in China, where there appears to her to be a "pecking order" of vehicle right-of-way, with pedestrians at the bottom.

Another, *Rice*, focuses on the main staple of the Chinese diet, how it is grown throughout the country and used in a "wedding ceremony," performed by a group of Miao people. The author, who served as the "groom," told the story from his perspective as a tourist, treating the

Table 1.
Digital Stories Ranked
According to Levels of Observed Reflection

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<i>Another Path</i>	<i>Chopsticks and Brotherhood</i>	<i>China's Walls</i>
<i>The Pecking Order</i>	<i>Lost in China</i>	<i>Friend or Foe</i>
<i>To China with Love</i>	<i>My Unexpected China</i>	<i>Music of the People</i>
<i>Rice</i>	<i>Paparazzi</i>	
	<i>The Squatty Potty Story</i>	
	<i>What China is Like Now?</i>	

experience as pure entertainment, rather than a reflection of the culture that produced it.

Six of the digital stories were classified as Level Two. The most important element missing in these stories is context. Each author thoroughly examined their memorable personal experience, but did not situate it within the larger political, cultural, or social system in China. For example, *Paparazzi* focused on the Chinese penchant for taking pictures of, or with, the group of travelers, but did not explain the historical isolation of China that made Western tourists “such a big deal” in the country.

Also at Level Two is *Squatty Potty*, a four-minute examination of Chinese hygiene, from the troughs at the roadside “rest stops” to the Western-style facilities at the nicer hotels. It is feel-good and funny, but the digital story fails to relate the situation to issues, such as urbanization that has grown faster than the sewer system and the uneven division of resources between the city and the country. And the story is told mostly from a Western perspective, although the author begins to reflect on how different cultures deal with bodily functions and acknowledges that the Chinese squatty potty may be more hygienic than the American stool-type bathroom fixture.

Three digital stories showed a high level of insight about Chinese culture and revealed clear manifestations of questioning, comparing, and reflecting on experience. Two of these digital stories are derived directly from events and reflections recorded in the journals.

One author, who recalled being a child of the “duck and cover” generation, had trouble reconciling the Red Menace of her early years to the friendliness of the Chinese people, the hospitality of our hosts and the eagerness of locals to interact with those who were so clearly “others.” She wonders aloud whether Mao’s ruthless Cultural Revolution was “the fire that was necessary to give birth to a new China?” “Was it necessary,” the narration continues, “to tragically destroy such an exquisite heritage for China to free herself from the weight of centuries of traditions?”

Another author uses the wall metaphor to describe the isolation she felt as a foreign guest traveling in China and the experience of realizing a dream. She talks about her excitement at visiting the Great Wall of China, the unexpected diversity of the climbers, and the universality of the experience.

Today was the day. It was the day I climbed the wall. I did it. I climbed to the top. I hung with the younger people. I hung with Arabs and Jews and Indians and Swedes. Skinny people were huffing and puffing and so was I. We all breathed in China and put one foot in front of the other. They smiled on the way down and so did I. I was exhilarated.

Later in her video, she refers to an afternoon experience at a park in Nanjing that changed her and her digital story. She was watching retired people dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments when, unexpectedly, a Chinese lady held out her hand and asked this U.S. teacher to dance.

My heart sang and my feet danced. I was mapping my digital story about the lack of a true cross culture exchange, and then I actually get some. That's one story I'm excited to make.

The third digital author wrote in his journal about wanting to capture the essence of his China experience in song. He hoped to meet musicians in China and share his passion for folk music. He mentions the internal conflict that he experienced due to highly programmed nature of our itinerary and the controlling attitude of our Chinese hosts, but he does not directly refer to their determined effort to prevent him from meeting with Chinese musicians, which is discussed in the digital story.

There was great people-watching today, although our Chinese minders had a different vision for our visit to the Temple of Heaven than my own vision. I wanted to walk slowly and take pictures of normal people doing normal everyday things, that to me, are fascinating. But our minders wanted us to see "beautiful things" and did not want me to be separated from the group.

Though the writer did not record in his journal the frustration he encountered when he tried to make contact with Chinese folk musicians, he clearly reveals in his digital story how reflection on experience changed his attitude toward the situation and led him to a global perspective.

When I go to the park, Chinese people are dancing. Retirees are playing old instruments and playing familiar songs. And then it hits me. I realize that I don't need permission to connect with people. I don't need to have a meeting with a folk music scholar or a famous folk musician to build community.

I realize that I didn't come to China to play music. I didn't come to China to climb the Great Wall, and I certainly didn't come to China to push the boundaries of individual freedoms or to challenge authority. I'm here in China to learn about its people, its people and its culture. It's my hope ...that through music, it's possible to build community, perhaps not so different from a community that emerges around a camp fire when we sing folk songs back home.

I will play music when ever and where ever the spirit moves me.....And when I play, Chinese people stop and listen. They tap their feet. When I play in a bar, people come in from the street when they hear me singing in English; when I share folk music, the music of the people.

Discussion

The digital stories at all levels of reflection were more indicative of the impact of an international immersion experience on teachers' level of intercultural competence than the journals. While the journals recorded a catalogue of events, the digital stories, even at the lowest level of reflection, were more indicative of the impact of the experience on teachers' level of intercultural competence than the journals. They told about much more than where they went or what they did. More important, the question of change itself—change in perception, change in belief, change in attitude, change in behavior, and change in values—seldom is addressed in journals (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 1992). It is addressed in the digital stories. The process of reflection required to create a digital story can be the ticket to a lifetime of successful cultural border crossings for teachers, whether they are going around the world or across the hall.

The digital stories focused on participants' interactions with Chinese people and Chinese culture. The digital stories provided a window into individual change and cultural experiences. They stand as permanent artifacts available for further reflection on consequences and choices, reexamination of the author's reactions in a cross-cultural situation and benchmarks for comparison with future growth. Journals are for telling; digital stories are for learning. Moreover, they are for sharing; journals are rarely seen by anyone other than the writer. Not so digital stories. Said one participant,

My digital story has become a way to preserve and re-visit the strong sense of connection I felt as I met and observed people on our trip.

Said another,

It was an incredible way of putting so many of my thoughts and feelings on paper. I relive my experience every time I see it.

Reflection artifacts can provide a window into the process of individual change, yielding important information for researchers seeking insight beyond participant self-reports to identify ways in which reflective processes can be evidenced. It is not enough to assert that reflection is encouraged by a procedure or technique; rather means must be specified to demonstrate that particular kinds of reflecting are taking place (Hatton & Smith 1994).

Many scholars have noted that culture is like an iceberg because so much of it is invisible or unobservable. Viewing the digital stories included in this study illustrated this analogy; many China Seminar participants struggled to dig beneath the surface and discuss culture

explicitly and were challenged by trying to situate themselves in the larger socio-cultural context. Even so, creation of digital stories increased awareness of culture and promoted reflection on Seminar participants' individual values and beliefs, an important first step in preparing them for the challenges of their work as teachers in our increasingly diverse society. "The digital story allowed me to look back at my fear and see how it was overcome to make me a stronger person," said one teacher. Like other participants in this Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad, producing a digital story helped the China experience cross the eighteen-inch border between her heart and her head.

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