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***The Global Citizen: Exploring Intercultural Collaborations and
the Lived Experience of Australian and Malaysian Students
During a Short-Term Study Tour in Malaysia***

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Abstract

This chapter draws from research on the ways in which a group of Australian and Malaysian preservice teachers reflected on their collaborative experiences during a short-term outbound mobility programme (OMP) in Malaysia. Funding was secured through the Australian Government's Study Overseas Short-term Mobility Program (STMP), which aimed at promoting opportunities for more Australians at the tertiary level to undertake meaningful short-term international mobility experiences. The research focused on how both groups of preservice teachers reflected on themselves as culturally responsive global citizens during and after the two-week programme in Kuala Lumpur. The hypothesis was that when coupled with appropriate reflection, experiential and reciprocal learning might contribute to increased intercultural capacity and regional awareness of global concerns such as respecting religious differences and the impact of environmental degradation. Findings suggest that from initial ethnocentric assumptions, both groups developed a respect for cultural difference through their intercultural encounters with each other. The research also found that the Australian and Malaysian preservice teachers gained deeper insights into their cultural selves as global citizens and how global perspectives can be shaped through regional contexts in the Asia Pacific.

Keywords: intercultural understanding, global citizen, global citizenship, global perspectives, experiential learning, overseas short-term mobility programme

Introduction

Transnational collaborations and international student mobility are increasingly valued in Australian universities (Rizvi, 2011). Widely viewed as a means of internationalizing higher

education and of addressing learning goals that respond to the conditions of globalization (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014; Suárez-Orozco, 2007) such as “problem-defining and solving perspectives that cross disciplinary and cultural boundaries” (Hudzik 2004, p. 1, as cited in Leask, 2013, p. 111), there are professional and personal benefits for participating students who travel overseas for various lengths of time (Brown, 2009; Gray, Downey, & Gothard, 2012; Lean, Staiff, & Waterton, 2014). Such benefits acquired through experiential learning and cross-cultural interactions abroad include developing an increased intercultural capacity and capability and a more nuanced global perspective as citizens in an interconnected world. Donleavy’s (2012) research, for example, found that all Australian universities refer to developing a global perspective and sense of citizenship as one of their five leading graduate attributes on their websites. In this chapter, we explore how one of the distinctive features of a short-term outbound mobility programme (OMP), the “buddying” of Australian and Malaysian preservice teachers, facilitated opportunities for both groups of students to reflect on themselves as culturally responsive individuals and mindful global citizens during and after the programme.

The mindful global citizen

In broad terms, citizenship is traditionally viewed as fixed and involuntary (Marshall, 1950), linked to a nation state and involving certain rights and responsibilities, whereas identity is more flexible and involves the individual placing importance on particular cultural or social attributes deemed of personal significance (Castells, 2010). Davies and Pike (2009) refer to global citizenship in cosmopolitan terms as “a state of mind” (p. 67). In this context, the global citizen can be conceptualized as someone who views and cares about the world as an interconnected system in ways which transcend national borders and who is willing to participate in communities of discourse and practice (Khondker, 2013). Put simply, the concepts of belonging to, and participating in, a world community are core to coming to terms with global citizenship and identifying as a global citizen.

The discourse on the global citizen in higher education is contested. First, it is not regarded as an official classification of citizenship and second, some contend there is limited evidence on what being a global citizen means in practice (Leask & Bridge, 2013). From a moral and cosmopolitan perspective, it can be argued that a citizen may develop a sense of belonging to a global political community through identification with those values that inspire principles such as social justice, equality of rights, and respect for human dignity upon which the

tenants of international frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, 1948), are based. Hence, whilst global citizens are not legally recognized individuals, they can exist in practice (Tawil, 2013).

This view of individuals aligning with others beyond national borders who share similar values and global concerns has been conceptualized by Keck and Sikkink (1998) as an expression of new forms of postnational citizenship. Others theorize a cosmopolitan view of the global citizen in terms of promoting an understanding of complex political, cultural, and international issues (Peters, Britton, & Blee, 2008); of facilitating a transformative mind-set for understanding how the economic, technical, social, environmental, and cultural facets of globalization are interlinked (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002); and also in terms of the ways in which common moral values can be shared by members of societies (Beck, 2006).

Similarly, Appiah (2006) theorizes the global citizen from a cosmopolitan standpoint and argues this view of citizenship fosters a moral ethic that offers a sense of “otherness” which, in turn, assists in building habits of coexistence and cooperation. From this moral and transformative cosmopolitan perspective, it is assumed that university-based international student mobility programmes can provide opportunities for students to engage with others constructively across cultural differences and to learn how to be global citizens.

Since 2013, a small group of academics from an Australian metropolitan university’s faculty of education in Brisbane have collaborated with their Malaysian colleagues in a teacher preparation institute in Kuala Lumpur to design and produce the curriculum and run a structured two-week study tour in Malaysia for 10 Australian preservice students. The programme consists of a series of briefings before, during, and after the study tour and one of its key features is the buddying of Australian and Malaysian preservice teachers so that both groups of students participate and collaborate in activities together in Malaysia. Such activities include street walks, sharing meals and observations in markets in Little India and Chinatown, visits to historical, religious, and cultural sites and institutions in Kuala Lumpur, as well as an excursion to Malacca. In addition, the Australian students attend on-campus lectures on language, history, and culture, and they participate in school visits that include reading an Australian children’s picture book to primary school students and presenting some follow-up activities on Australian culture in the lesson. They also visit the Australian High Commission and receive a formal briefing on aspects of Australia–Malaysia relations. As a key component of their experiential cross-cultural learning, the Australian students are

required to maintain a video diary to record their responses to a series of questions prior to departure and whilst they are in Malaysia.

Whilst funding for the programme's first three years was provided by the Australian Government's Study Overseas Short-term Mobility Program (STMP), New Colombo Plan funding supported the fourth year of the programme in 2016. Malaysia was selected as the site for the STMP for two reasons. First, the Australian academics had an established relationship through previous projects with their Malaysian colleagues in Kuala Lumpur and sought to further this collaboration in a spirit of reciprocity and mutual benefit. Second, whilst there is a push for young Australians to be "Asia literate" and familiar with the countries and cultures of the Asia Pacific region (Henderson, 2015), Malaysia has not traditionally been included in the curriculum focus despite the fact that Australia and Malaysia share a long history of cooperation, evidenced by the celebration of the 60th anniversary of Australia's diplomatic presence in Malaysia in 2015. The study tour provided an opportunity for both the Australian and Malaysian preservice teachers to be cognizant of this significant bilateral relationship as global and regional citizens through authentic intercultural engagement.

Methodology

A qualitative case study approach (Stake, 2005) was adopted to investigate the broad research question, "In what ways do short-term study tours in Malaysia impact on preservice teachers' learning in both countries?" This chapter focuses on one component of the research which addresses global citizenship and preservice teachers' cultural selves (Tangen et al., 2015). Data are taken from transcriptions of the Australian students' video diaries (VD); transcripts of focus groups (FG) with Malaysian (M, n = 15) and Australian (A, n = 10) preservice teachers during the programme in Kuala Lumpur; the transcripts of interviews (I) with (3) Malaysian and (3) Australian preservice students in Kuala Lumpur and some of the Australian and Malaysian academics, subsequently published as an article titled "Teaching Across Cultures" in the "Learning Curve" supplement of the Malaysian newspaper the *New Straits Times*, December 7, 2014; and from testimonials (T) written by both groups of students four weeks after the programme. One of the accompanying academics who participated in activities with the students kept a reflective journal of observations (ARJ) and this was also analysed. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted across data sets to identify emerging codes, which were subsequently grouped into themes. Following the

inductive phase, a deductive approach was applied to identify those themes associated with global citizenship and preservice teachers' reflections on themselves as culturally responsive individuals (Tangen et al., 2015).

Findings of the Study

All the Australian and Malaysian preservice teachers found the buddy relationship critical to the nature of their conversations and collaborations with each other and that this, in turn, facilitated their intercultural learning during the two-week programme. These reciprocal exchanges created opportunities for students to reflect on their initial ethnocentric (Bennett, 2004) assumptions that revealed an inability to recognize the diversity between different cultures, and to move beyond them in a collegial and unthreatening context. One Australian student noted:

This bond we created with our buddies allowed me to learn more about their culture, values and beliefs at a personal level. It was very special to learn more about the ethnicity groups and through conversation we became close through wanting to learn more about each other's cultures. (T-A2-10)

Similarly, a Malaysian student reflected:

It has been an intense cultural exchange. We learnt a lot about Australian culture. We share lots of similarities in terms of culture and education. The more you get to know the Australian student teachers, the more you learn. For example, we went to Malacca and we discussed colonisation, and we shared our thoughts about it. My experience as a buddy is priceless. The past two weeks have been an eye-opener. You may think we are from two different worlds but lots of things are similar. (I-M2-15)

The conversations and reflections also provided opportunities for both the Malaysian and the Australian preservice teachers to move beyond homogenous assumptions about their own and each other's cultures. One of the Malaysian students reflected:

Before this program I generally wasn't interested in Australia at all. My parents told me it has become another Malaysia because Malaysians go there all the time by exchange. I thought Australia is just about koalas and kangaroos but after this program I have learned more . . . I didn't know the Aboriginal people have their own

flag . . . It has helped me to become more interested in Australia . . . especially the Aboriginal culture. The program has helped spark my interest indeed. (FG-M-8-15)

Another Malaysian student recalled:

I did know something about Australian culture and was aware we are exotic to them and they are equally exotic to us but just knowing that is not going to make it interesting. What I have found through this program when you begin to interact you realize Australia has an interesting culture and as you learn more about the culture and yourself . . . (FG-M-5-15)

In her video diary, one of the Australian students noted:

We assume things in their culture, we found that they assume that we don't have it, we're like no, no we have it, it's like a lot of things, they're like do you have that in your country? and we're like, yes, we do . . . so the conversations we had with our buddies made us all more aware of the cultural things we realise we share. (VD-A-2-10)

Findings indicated the reciprocal learning between the Australians and their Malaysian “buddies” enabled both groups of students to reflect upon some of the awkward experiences that arose during their interactions because of a lack of intercultural understanding. Significantly, many of these incidents related to religious tenants and protocols. An example of this was the Australian students giving food that was not halal as gifts to their Malaysian buddies. One of the Malaysian students recalled in a focus group “there was a cultural issue with presents like Tim Tams which we cannot eat. The [Australian] students were offended when we explained to them we cannot eat Tim Tams” (FG-M-9-15). Following this discussion, an Australian student recalled, “I had no idea that Tim Tams were not halal—we were embarrassed, the buddies were embarrassed—but it helped to talk it through” (VD-A-3-10). Similarly, an Australian female student spontaneously hugged one of the male Muslim students at the official ceremony that marked the conclusion of the programme:

During the closing ceremony I was hugged by one of the [Australian] students in front of everybody and this is not our culture and religion. After the ceremony we explained why I couldn't hug the student. (FG-M-7-15)

With reference to the learning about Muslim culture that came out of conversations with some of the buddies about this incident as well as other instances of awkward intercultural encounters, an Australian student commented:

I think it is important for [Australian] pre-service teachers to travel abroad. It kind of demystifies the ‘other.’ I think travelling to a Muslim country as well has been really great. Like I feel more confident to be able to engage with Muslims in my school community and in Australia in general. (FG-A10-10)

In this context, one of the Malaysian students reflected:

Our culture and the way we live is totally different to Australia because of Muslim traits and Christian traits but we have been exposed to the Australian culture and have a respect and understand certain things cannot be done. (FG-M-12-15)

Findings also found that both groups of students participated in discussions about several national and regional environmental issues that concerned them. During the bus trip to visit Malacca, the Australian students were struck by the extensive nature of the palm oil plantations they observed: “There are acres and acres of palm oil trees—no wonder the orangutans are at risk” (VD-A-6-10). Related to this was their firsthand experience of being in Malaysia during the smoke haze caused by illegal forest logging and burning in Indonesia and the impact of this practice: “The buddies explained to us that when it [the smoke haze] gets really bad the schools are closed and people have to stay indoors and they asked us if we have this problem with the land clearing and burning in Australia” (FG-A-7-10).

Whilst in Malacca, an Australian student became concerned about the impact of pollution in the Malacca River:

The tour guide told us the government let thousands of lizards into the river to eat the rubbish. He didn’t know what species of lizards they were. It is environmentally dangerous. It was fairly recent and happened in the last 10–20 years. I kept looking for lizards. It’s not healthy for the lizards. (VD-A-7-10)

Meanwhile, some of the Malaysian students asked questions about the coral bleaching in the Great Barrier Reef and referred to the media coverage it had received in Kuala Lumpur (ARJ). An Australian student reflected that the buddies’ questions about this prompted a late-

night discussion between both groups of students about broader environmental concerns. “We talked a lot about the state of the oceans, the impact of plastic waste and pollution in our part of the world—it is a real concern” (T-A5-10).

Challenging conversations occurred between both groups of students about people trafficking and the plight of refugees in the region. Whilst catching the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) in Kuala Lumpur with their buddies, some of the Australian students noticed posters displaying photographs of two young children who “disappeared” at the Putrajaya MRT station (ARJ). During the ensuing discussion, one of the Malaysian students referred to the government’s 2007 anti-trafficking law and its public awareness campaign on human trafficking, two other students shared their insights about other incidents of young children reported missing, whilst four of the Malaysian students were reticent about discussing the issue and expressed their lack of knowledge (ARJ). When an Australian student shared her experiences volunteering in a women’s centre where former trafficked women from Thailand were housed, the discussion shifted to the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. Some of the Malaysian students asked about the Australian [Gillard Labor] Government’s proposal to send unwanted asylum seekers to Malaysia in 2011. The responses from the Australian students ranged from expressions of embarrassment that they knew so little about what happened to asylum seekers to strong statements about the need to protect their human rights (ARJ). Reflecting on these conversations, an Australian student recalled, “We could not have talked openly about these issues if we weren’t so close to our buddies” (T-A2-10), whilst a Malaysian student noted that “even though they are people who are quite different and worlds apart there are a lot of similarities with them and you can actually find yourself in them when you discuss the challenges we face” (FG-M-2-15).

Discussion

The budding of students was critical to the quality of the learning outcomes that occurred during this intensive short-term study tour. Findings indicate that these relationships served as “catalysts” to exploring and discussing a range of intercultural and global issues in their regional context, such as respecting religious differences and the impact of environmental degradation.

The findings also support Hall et al.’s (2016) view that for transformative outcomes to occur during a short-term international experience, students require scaffolding and pedagogical

support. In this programme, the predeparture briefings provided Australian students with conceptual models of culture that were further explored via the structured reflections they were required to record in their video dairies. Student responses to these guided critical self-reflections that fostered their ability to “make associations and reconciliations” (Billett, 2011, p. 14) between what they knew and what they did not know with what they actually experienced in-country. Such integration of reflective thinking before and during the programme created opportunities for students to develop their appreciation of, and to make connections between, their understanding of what they encountered and to move towards ethnorelativism (Bennett, 2004). This, in turn, was critical to students gaining deeper insights into their cultural selves as global citizens and how global perspectives can be shaped through regional contexts in the Asia Pacific. Buddying enabled both groups of students to participate in communities of discourse and practice (Khondker, 2013), and during their collaborations and conversations, both groups of students began to recognize the interconnections they shared. The accumulative effect of such intense interactions amongst the students and their reflections during this process fostered “a state of mind” (Davies & Pike, 2009, p. 67) for global citizenship.

Conclusion

There are several limitations to this research. As funding enabled only limited numbers of students to participate for the duration of two weeks, generalizability to other contexts is restricted. Furthermore, it is not possible to make claims about the long-term impact of the learning outcomes from this OMP and further research is required to ascertain the degree to which in-country collaborations and related intercultural experiences continued to impact upon these preservice teachers as global citizens and as beginning teachers.

Nevertheless, the study confirms Rizvi’s (2011) view that transnational collaborations in higher education can be socially and culturally productive. Over the duration of the two-week programme, the Australian and Malaysian students began to display the qualities of global citizenship; their collaborations indicated an emerging moral ethic or sense of mindful “otherness” as they cooperated together during the programme, and their conversations revealed their increasing awareness of how global issues and concerns can be shaped through regional contexts. The current research indicates that Appiah’s (2006) cosmopolitan view of the global citizen can be applied to the short-term learning outcomes of this OMP in Malaysia.

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