Field Experience Interview on Multiculturalism in Education (Part 2)

EDUC 723 Multicultural Issues in Education

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Introduction: A Conversation with an Asian Schoolmate

My interviewee (whom I hereby address as Mr. L, with he/him/his pronouns) is a graduate student designer and practitioner in the field of intelligent construction. He is with the Asian ethnic group, *the same* group than mine. In this reflective summary report, I aim to give a short account of what took place during the interview, interesting ingredients we had as interviewer and interviewee, and extract key findings/statements from the interview, followed by a section of critical discussion relating to course readings. In addition, I appended a more detailed draft of our dialogue in the end for more information about what we exactly talked about.

It may be worth pointing out that we were using English and Chinese interchangeably during the conversation, so whenever we felt a need to amend what we said we would do so. The transcript was adjusted/translated to English.

Descriptive Summary of the Conversation

We started the meeting with a little bit of self-introduction to each of us—our disciplines, academic backgrounds, and personal interests, as we are both graduate international students in the same University. He is a student of scientific discipline and design, so it was a bit surprise to me when, as I first brough up the question of what multiculturalism may be conceptualized, he shared a unique perspective based on what he experienced from the place he grew up—he told me that in Taiwan this kind of concept is normally referred to as "societal education". Based on his language and description, what I can interpret is that in that particular social setting, the knowledge related to cultures, diversity,

and civil rights in general are taught to people as a general conception, and it (as he pointed out) was initially "controlled" by the government for the manipulation of public opinion.

Although he did not have much "authentic" experience or taste with other cultures as he grew up before adulthood, I could sense in Mr. L's narration that he grasped with clarity the difference between knowing others' culture/lifestyle and merely having a temporary crossover with a foreign person. Partly guided by my questions, Mr. L mentioned his after-school teachers from foreign countries who taught him and other kids English in a "fully-English" classroom setting. He also had travelled to America as a tourist several times, which provided him with some taste of the American culture. He did not though have the chance to get to know many native indigenous people in Taiwan because of the specific administrative region he lived in. Later in college, going to Spain as an exchange student stood out among his experiences as one that left him with significant impression of a multicultural environment—he narrated that people in Spain were quite passionate overall, but there were many ethnic groups and people lived and behaved in different ways accordingly. We compared this to America where people identify themselves individually and differently into various ethnic/cultural groups; my understanding on his sharing here is that in Spain people perhaps, in a relatively smaller geographic space, are diverse and different but yet more "together" as they still share many hobbies in common (not at all that American people do not).

Mr. L told me that he did not consider our school as a very diverse or "multicultural" place: the student body consists mostly of domestic American students, along with many Chinese international students; in one of his class, there were two-thirds who were international students from China. He shared with me how he experienced the cultural differences when conversing and communicating with other international students including those from China; the popular words and expressions used are quite different.

When being asked what the most significant factor(s) for would be in embracing foreign cultures and diversity, Mr. L emphasized the importance of language, suggesting that if one mastered language (specifically English in this context) then he/she could access materials and learn things at a very efficient pace in this Internet age. To get to the "frontier", he thought that for certain disciplines such as what he studied it was more than great to go aboard, even if it does not necessarily and immediately benefit you academically. At the personal level, going abroad provides you a different perspective and expands one's horizon. He suggested that it wouldn't be too late to start it in college. Culture, as far as he is concerned, must be under *comparison* so as to be recognized or realized by people; if one lived his/her entire life in the same environment, he/she would unlikely be aware of what his/her own "culture" means. He also appreciated the teachers during his undergraduate studies who encouraged students like him to explore their studies by going abroad.

Key Findings and Assumptions

1. Culture, in certain sense, is only well-defined and recognized where there is comparison—i.e. if one hasn't compared his/her own with any other culture, it would be hard for him/her to be aware of what his/her own culture is.

2. Language is a primary factor when it comes to embracing foreign, different cultures. It allows one to access and interpret knowledge.

3. Studying abroad may not bring the best academic benefits, but to the student it broadens his/her horizon and gives him/her a new, different cultural perspective that is important to growth.

Connection to Course Readings: Learning, Culture, and Language

Throughout the whole interview process across the multiple sub-topics covered, there was a thematic fact which underlies the entire conversation, and it was that we were both international students who chose, for any reasons, to study abroad on a different cultural environment. We are in this fundamental

sense here to learn knowledge and skills, thus it is important to think about how we learn or generally how putting oneself in a different cultural setting affects one's learning.

In practice/real life, learning can be influenced by cultural differences that include any individual differences in personalities, how people interact and communicate within the same discourse community. The configuration under which learning takes place has been abstractly elaborated in the book The Light in Their Eyes (Nieto, 2010) that learning initially is an active process as it usually involves the formation of certain habits; as learning builds upon the learner's experience, attitudes, behaviors, and many other factors, an "intersectional" configuration for the underling complexity (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Nieto stated that culture (which Mr. L thinks would stand out if/only when it is compared to others) "determines" students' learning capabilities as it is manifested differently in each student.

The benefit of gaining new perspectives and staying up with frontiers of the professional community that Mr. L (explicitly and implicitly) pointed out emphasized these "other dimensions" which go around the process of learning; to distinguish a learning environment, in his words, may no longer be determined by only academic advantages, but more by what types of *experience* it can provide to the learner. Setting aside any controversy here, we might have to acknowledge that this is indeed some trend among international learners who both pursue their studies and "share reality" with domestic students in America. Meanwhile, the importance of language that impressed upon Mr. L's reflection as we talked through significant factors of multiculturalism speaks an actual reality of language's being deeply implicated with culture and "as culture" as suggested in Nieto's book.

References

Nieto, S. (2010). *The light in their eyes: creating multicultural learning communities*. 10th anniversary ed. New York: Teachers College Press.

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). Intersectionality (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

Appendix: Transcript and Outline of Interview (Revised from the Original)

1. What are your general conceptualization of multiculturalism, in education and in society?

Mr. L: Given your above introduction on multicultural issues and concerns in education, it lets me recall when we were referring to this where I grew up (Taiwan) as a kind of "societal education", which addresses at not only the school setting but also the overall society – part of its goals in the early old times was to monitor or manipulate public opinion.

2. What is your journey growing up, in regards of foreign cultures and domestic multiculturalism?

Mr. L: Throughout my early childhood and adolescence I did not have many opportunities to live overseas, except for going for travels to the United States with my parents. In some after-school tutoring programs, I met some foreign teachers especially in learning English, while it was not the kind of real cultural experience yet.

Me: Understood, thank you. I learned about Taiwanese indigenous people before; had you ever got any chance to meet or interact with some of them?

Mr. L: Because of the specific residential region I lived in where I was young, there were not any native indigenous people living near me or went to the same school as I.

Me: Have you worked or studied in other countries in the world?

Mr. L: I actually had been to multiple foreign places before, for example to Spain as an exchange student in college, and to Germany in Berlin. In terms of "cultural differences", the experience in Spain was more impressive; as compared to the United States which is inherently a country of "outside" cultures and immigrants (maybe not here, but especially in

New York), which it by itself its identity, in Spain there are also multiple ethnic groups and people are more passionate in general—and among these different peoples there are different ways of dialogue, cooking styles, and so on. While in the United States people normally identified themselves accordingly and differently based on who they are and where they come from—people are able to find their ways here.

3. Could you describe a little about your current working/learning environment, in terms of diversity and multiculturalism?

Mr. L: I don't consider it (this current environment) to be "diverse" or "multicultural", since its main constituents are the domestic American students plus Chinese international students; there are indeed many Chinese students who come to our school for graduate studies.

Me: Indeed. I've also realized that in our school there are more foreign Asian students than I'd seen in other American universities. In particular, among your acquaintance and peers and friends, are many of them Asians and Chinese?

Mr. L: Yes, many of my peers are from China. I do know several Taiwanese students but am not quite close with them yet, because the only means we could get together or communicate is through student associations, etc., which is not super well organized as far as I experienced; also they are usually not in my department/school, and the proportion is much lower. In one of my class, for example, over two-thirds of the students are Chinese. I've also had classmates from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and India.

Me: Got it. And when you communicate with these international students, do you feel in any ways it is a little like a cross-cultural experience?

Mr. L: Yes. With most of them, even with students from China, I had experienced some differences in terms of culture, in that when it comes to popular words/expressions and concepts, we have

different ways of usage. Such differences are just as recognizable as ones I experienced with domestic American students.

4. If you were to share any advice with youths about embracing different/diverse cultures, what would you emphasize/share with them?

Mr. L: In general, I'd say it is not bad not to start getting exposed to different cultures until you are in college. First, language is an important component, since many major resources and disciplines are directed in the West, so that if you know English for example you'd be able to find these materials, such as software development skills. To get to the frontier, so is to say. Second, when it comes to cultures, going aboard provides you with a different worldview; "culture" is almost equivalent to difference, because normally you have to compare your own with other cultures in order to be aware of it—what are the features of your own culture. If you are always in your own culture the entire life, you might not be able to realize what it is. I think of going out at night in an urban environment to buy a bottle of soft drink, which can be a "culture" at where I lived at home country while might not be something easy here in Philadelphia.

Me: Good advice and explanation. How could, then, cultural exposures or experiences be beneficial to personal growth?

Mr. L: Take studying aboard as an example. If I go overseas to school (undergraduate, exchange student, or graduate school), it might not always benefit you academically very much as compared to other aspects, such as expanding your horizons.

5. Do you have, along your journey, some mentor or senior advisor or teachers, who have inspired you or guided you in significant ways in terms of cross-cultural understanding?

Mr. L: Sure. I have had (e.g. undergraduate years in Taiwan) both foreign and domestic teachers, of course. Honestly, in my discipline, most teachers encourage their students to go aboard for studies to explore; because of the constant development in the discipline, such as materials, technology, etc., so when you came to another country you may likely encounter something completely fresh which you had never seen before, a new technique, procedure, etc. Therefore, although one can certainly make good stuff by staying in one's own country, he/she may become better in research by studying aboard. I have about at least four teachers who told me so, to try to go aboard for studies.