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Intercultural journeys: from study to residence abroad

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As globalisation trends create the opportunity and need for cross-cultural communication, Jackson points to the increase in university-based study-abroad programmes as a way to introduce the reader to Intercultural Journeys. Having brought 14 university students from Hong Kong to England in order to teach a five-week study-abroad course, Jackson gives an account of her practitioner research examining the link between their second language acquisition and development of intercultural communicative competence. As all of her sojourners made different degrees of progress in their acquisition of cultural competencies, this book matters to its audience of professors and administrators who wish to identify models of study-abroad courses that successfully increase both L2 and cultural development.

In Chapters 1, 2, and 3, Jackson defines the framework for her study. Rather than assigning the term ‘globalisation’ to the economic trend that has led to the increase in study-abroad courses around the world, she prefers the term ‘internationalisation’ (p. 10). She refers to McCabe’s (2001) point about the agency that it affords participants because of its emphasis on the understanding of specific countries and on social, economic, and academic relations. Her choice is significant because it appears that her study-abroad course is intended to develop the sensitivity, curiosity, and communication capacities of students in a way that responds to the professional and intellectual demands of an increasingly global world economy. She explores participant ethnocentrism, which is an attitude that has been connected by researchers to colonialism and globalisation. Connecting the theme of colonialism to her research, she describes Hong Kong’s history where English became the language of the British colonial presence. This history would later factor into the identity conflicts faced by some of her Hong Kong students in their attitudes towards learning the language of the former conquerors.

Jackson defines intercultural competence and cultural development by using Byram’s (1997) intercultural communicative competence model, along with Bennett’s (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. In order to assess student cultural development, she uses the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer & Bennett, 2002), which quantitatively assesses the stages of the sojourners’ move from ethnocentrism towards a more accepting, ethnorelative stance. Her use of the IDI allows her to measure the discrepancy between student self-perceived competence and actual competence. The results, particularly when compared to some comments about host communities in the students’ journals, indicate that they sometimes had unrealistic notions of their own degree of sensitivity.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the findings of Jackson’s four selected case studies which explored the three stages of the course: pre-sojourn, sojourn, and post-sojourn. In Chapters 7 and 8, she discusses in further detail the components of the course and the various quantitative and qualitative research instruments she employed. Jackson tracks the development of her students’ intercultural competence by weighing the significance of the following factors: instrumental motivation, travel experiences, language development, identity formation, participation in the course-required ethnography projects, and student-defined learning goals. She distinguishes her position from the one associated with the intercultural competence literature by challenging Bennett, Bennett, and Allen’s (2003)
notion that the increase in L2 learning parallels the increase in intercultural communicative competence. She demonstrates that some of her students acquired strong L2 skills but made comparatively marginal gains in intercultural development.

She provides week-by-week narratives of students’ learning trajectory, illustrated by their interviews and diary entries, revealing the ways they define their own experiences. Using data that are vivid and explicit, she judiciously selects the students’ own journal entries to allow them to paint self-portraits for the reader. They progress at different rates towards improved capacities in intercultural communication while, in some cases, holding on to ethnocentric beliefs about language, identity, and culture. Some of these beliefs are nuanced further by the complex colonial history of the English language as the language of the British colonial presence in Hong Kong. Incidentally, it is notable that among the case studies presented, the quieter students tend to not only acquire less intercultural competence, but sometimes also project their negative feelings arising from their isolation onto their new environment. In the process, they can reinforce stereotypes about the host culture that they had already held. An interesting finding regarding student learning which may be mentioned in passing is that those who were more open to new cuisine were more likely to take an active role in their host community.

Despite the book’s many strengths, there are a few minor oversights. In a few instances, the reader is referred to concepts that are illustrated on the internet. Upon visiting the relevant homepages, however, this reviewer searched in vain for references to the concepts in question. These minor issues do not detract, however, from the overall quality of her work. Jackson situates her study within the context of the expanding global marketplace and her students’ capacities, through her study-abroad course, to successfully navigate across international boundaries. If learning is to be valued as a process, her students demonstrate a real engagement in and struggle with that process, leading to quantifiable results as indicated by the IDI scores. All students made progress, though few if any of them attained the highest degree of interculturality on the IDI. Ultimately, perhaps this is not surprising given the relatively short duration of the course itself.

This book is valuable in an era where a course’s sustainability often requires measurable results. Jackson not only identifies the elements of a strong study-abroad course, but assembles a wide variety of instruments that can be used to describe and analyse the experience and its impact. Promoting the course, however, is not her purpose. Her case studies provide vivid examples of the bumpy ride that can be experienced by students engaging in cross-cultural learning, a sometimes challenging process that involves self-reflection and openness to new ways of seeing and being.

References

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