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Life outside your comfort zone: The power of reflection for cultural adjustment

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ABSTRACT

This reflective article explores the different experiences of two higher education professionals who utilized intentional reflection to help with the transition to new countries and cultural environments. Both stories focus on how these higher education professionals grappled with challenges of being members of majority and minority groups within the racial and religious contexts of their new environments. The article concludes by sharing recommendations for how other higher education professionals can utilize reflection to help with transition and cultural adjustment.

Keywords: academic mobility, cultural adjustment, faculty transition, international faculty, minority faculty, reflection, transnational scholar

Cultural adjustment in higher education is a phenomenon that is often researched through the lens of international students in a new country (Mahmood & Burke, 2018; Wang, Li, Noltemeyer, Wang, & Shaw, 2018), but many stakeholders experience cross-cultural challenges in higher education. For example, international faculty worldwide experience some of the same cultural adjustment challenges as their students. The purpose of this reflective article is twofold: (a) it aims to share the stories of the authors—two international faculty/staff from different backgrounds who grappled with cultural adjustment and transition in new environments; and (b) it demonstrates the power of reflection as an effective cultural adjustment strategy. Through the process of intentional reflection, both professionals were able to

effectively adjust and transition into a new country and workplace. Recommendations are provided for readers to incorporate reflection into their lives.

REFLECTION

Reflection can serve as a learning tool to help people constructively develop and grow from their experiences (Bay & MacFarlane, 2010; Ellis, Carette, Anseel, & Lievens, 2014; Jordi, 2011; Moon, 2004; Toole & Toole, 1995). When reflection is followed by intentional and thoughtful actions, it can lead to further questions and ideas that make reflection effective and cyclical. The reflection process is a broad concept that includes a plethora of cognitive and experiential learning approaches (Ellis et al., 2014). An effective approach developed by Carol Rodgers (2002) expounds upon the work of John Dewey (1933), clarifies the ways that reflection is defined and applied in educational settings, and refines the criteria for purposeful reflection. Following Rodgers (2002) and Dewey (1933/1910), we view reflection to encompass the following characteristics:

- **Meaningful:** Some experiences are out of our control, but we control the meaning we attach to the experiences that inform our actions.
- **Systematic:** Reflection is our ability to comprehensively draw on past experiences and is not just a stream of random thoughts.
- **Interactive:** It should not be an independent and lonely process to ponder thoughts, but an opportunity to express and share our ideas and broaden our perspective.
- **Disciplined:** Individuals must have the right attitude, emotions, open-mindedness, and readiness to reflect effectively. Otherwise, it is our nature to see what we want as truth rather than the evidence.

Our experiences embarking on careers outside of our home country highlight the importance and significance of reflection as a tool for learning and professional development. The following personal narratives highlight the aforementioned criteria for engagement in effective reflection.

Reflection #1: From Minority to Majority

In 2012, I moved to the Caribbean island of Antigua. Prior to this transition, I had spent most of my life studying and working in the United States. I grew up in the US as a first-generation American, a child of West African parents. My family instilled in me a sense of pride and I strongly embraced my deep cultural roots of Sierra Leonean and Liberian values, but I also struggled with the experiences and racial injustices of being a minority in my neighborhood and in the workplace. On the other hand, moving to Antigua was full of excitement and anxiety. I was faced with new cultural norms, food, customs, dialects, and etiquettes. From a professional point of view, I was navigating the idiosyncrasies of a cross-border institutional model. From day one, I was surrounded by diverse faculty including their various perspectives and approaches to learning and student support. I was readjusting my

views of autonomy and goals for student development. In addition to cultural adjustment, I was also trying to prove myself as a new and valuable employee all while being away from my family and the familiarity of support systems back home.

One of the more meaningful experiences of this transition was my newfound change in racial status. I was no longer a racial minority in Antigua. I was now part of the majority in a predominantly Black society. The weight of daily survival tactics associated with my experiences in the US were lifted from my shoulders. I was not even aware of how profoundly relieving and empowering this experience would be. On a daily basis I could blend in with the crowd, find products that were meant for my skin tone and hair texture, and see that all positions of power and influence in government were held by individuals who looked like me. At that moment, I acutely realized how draining it was to engage in the daily survival tactics associated with my minority status in the US.

I had a similar epiphany of newly found majority status when I later moved to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). I became immersed in an Islamic society that matched my faith and I experienced a new aspect of privilege: practicing my faith openly, unapologetically, and without fear. It was no longer a challenge to find halal foods, prayer rooms in public, or opportunities to experience a larger sense of community. I felt as though I could be my authentic self without the tangential thoughts of being judged, harmed, ridiculed, or questioned.

Although both of my international moves resulted in newly acquired privileges, there were still other areas of cultural adjustment. My status as a minority in my home country prepared me for adjusting to my host countries. My experiences aligned with findings from a research study conducted by Volpone, Casper, Marquardt, and Avery (2018): “People who were members of more minority groups in their home country acculturated to a host country more rapidly” (p. 260). In other words, I was able to draw from my previous experiences as a minority to cope and adjust in new environments.

With each new experience I accomplished personal and professional growth. Reflection and mentoring provided insight and support for ways to adjust. I found myself grappling with similar issues as some of my students and thought, “How can I help them work through this?” and “How can I encourage them to think critically, problem solve, and process their experiences?” One day, one of my colleagues expressed his frustration with his newfound status as a minority. He gained a new realization of feeling like the “outsider” or “other” and no longer had the privilege of blending in or having easy access to services and products that he desired. This moment allowed us to share diverse perspectives, learn from one another, and increase compassion and empathy for each other’s experiences. We were both struggling to redefine our roles and levels of privilege in our host country. We discussed cultural factors that were at play, White privilege, and the developmental process of cultural adjustment. Reflecting on this critical moment of sharing and learning allowed me to explore ways to better support myself, colleagues, and students with cultural adjustment. It encouraged me to engage in these bold conversations as a lifelong learning endeavor.

Reflection #2: From Majority to Minority

There are only a few occasions in my childhood or adolescence that I can remember feeling like a minority. Growing up as a White middle-class woman in a small town in the southeastern US put me squarely in a comfort zone that I didn't know existed until later in life. It wasn't until moving to the UAE that I finally understood what it felt like to be a minority.

The UAE is a multicultural and open-minded society, but one can quickly feel the Islamic backbone of the country. I grew up in a Christian household, so hearing the call to prayer and seeing a mosque on every corner was a stark contrast from the world where I grew up. Particularly in the US and in higher education, Christians are known to have certain privileges that correlate with a higher satisfaction in their higher education experience (Bowman & Smedley, 2013). This was a privilege I had in my college experiences and in my career without even realizing it until living in the UAE. Additionally, in my professional work in the UAE I interacted primarily with local students and colleagues from around the world. I had experience engaging with a variety of cultures through my previous work with international students, but it was always on my home turf in the US. I had also studied abroad in Europe, but it was in a similar racial, cultural, and linguistic society and I now realize I was not pushed outside of my comfort zone. In the UAE, I was in the minority for the first time and I had to learn how to navigate and adjust myself daily. Many of the cultural and religious references, or professional student development models that I had used before didn't work for my students.

Racial and national statuses are seen differently in the UAE than in the US. There were some elements of privilege I still maintained as a White American woman, but I was never viewed or treated as the priority. That was a big shift and helped me to understand how many people feel in the US. Some memories that remain strong in my mind were the initial uneasiness that I had navigating new and unfamiliar situations in a different cultural context where I was supposed to be the teacher and the authority figure. I had to ask myself "What is expected of me in this situation?" and "How can I be true to myself but be mindful of where I am?" As I started to work more closely with my students, I engaged in different aspects of reflection to adjust to my new circumstances. During a typical week, particularly in the first few months I would reflect weekly on my interactions with students inside and outside of class, discuss any challenges and insights with my colleagues and friends, and think about how to best approach challenging situations moving forward. This process of reflection helped me to engage, process, understand, and make the best decisions in my personal and professional life and internalize my new understanding of the world. I find as well with passing time that my experiences in the UAE continue to teach me new lessons through the lens of my current experience.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is essential to find ways to make reflection a part of our regular practice as professionals, and more importantly as educators. Reflection can be powerful and also serve an important role in the way we help students and ourselves adapt to new

environments. Rodgers (2002) offered a clear approach to phases of reflection that aligns with the scientific method approach to reflection first introduced by Dewey (1933/1910).

1. An Experience Occurs: This requires patience and not acting on first assumptions. Sometimes we need to distance ourselves to get a broader and more objective view of the situation.
2. Interpret: Describe the experience and identify the problem or questions.
3. Analysis: Generate possible explanations
4. Intelligent action: Test out your hypothesis: “What might have been a reaction based on simple-minded analysis (phase two) is thus transformed into a possible reflective response based on full knowledge of its ramifications” (Rodgers, 2002, p. 854).

Engaging in this ongoing contemplative practice helps us grow through new, challenging, and unexpected experiences both personally and professionally. At the same time, it helps us find ways to use this as a tool to encourage our students to try new experiences, identify the lessons or challenges they face, and become critical thinkers who engage in “intelligent action.”

While there is little data about faculty and staff who work outside their home country, it is more important than ever for educational professionals to understand diverse perspectives. Sandgren, Elig, Hovde, Krejci, and Rice (1999) suggested that even short-term international academic experiences for faculty can enhance the global content of classroom teaching and enrich the student learning experience. We hope that sharing our experiences of utilizing reflection can inspire others to consider working in a different cultural environment and also help others who may be in a similar situation.

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