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Brenda B. MacKay
Cedarville University

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The Power of Journaling: A Dynamic Tool for Evaluating Student Teacher Adjustment in Cross-Cultural Contexts

Abstract

Journaling is an acceptable pedagogical and assessment tool used to help leverage a university student teacher's emotional and spiritual growth in a 10 week cross-cultural student teaching experience. The process requires students to document their life and learning experiences.

Questions are designed for student response. Student teachers are encouraged to draw personal connections between their lives and new experiences. This article will show how journaling helped four student teachers process what Kelly and Meyers (1995) identify as the four components of cross-cultural adaptability: (1) emotional resilience, (2) flexibility/openness, (3) perceptual acuity and (4) personal autonomy. Excerpts from the personal journals of students are included for each of these four components. The journals are used to assess student preparation for cross-cultural living, weekly physical, emotional and spiritual health, the learning environment, and the learning process.

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Brenda B. MacKay

Summary: Journaling is an acceptable pedagogical and assessment tool used to help leverage a university student teacher's emotional and spiritual growth in a 10 week cross-cultural student teaching experience. The process requires students to document their life and learning experiences.

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Introduction

As coordinator for the student teaching abroad program at Cedarville University, I have found myself searching for pedagogical and assessment tools to help leverage a student's cross-cultural experience for maximum success. One tool that appears to influence the growth of cross-cultural adaptability is journaling. Journaling is private writing designed to help students reflectively respond to their new culture, school relationships, adjustment, preparation and changes brought about by the new experience of student teaching abroad. This article will show how journaling helped the growth process of four students in what Kelly and Meyers (1995) identify as the four components of cross-cultural adaptability.

The journaling process requires students to document their life and learning experiences while overseas. The ideas, thoughts, and reflections are recorded in student

responses to weekly questions that are emailed to my office. The questions are designed to encourage students to draw personal connections between their lives and their new experiences. Below is a brief summary of the Kelly and Meyers (1995) adaptability components: (1) emotional resilience, (2) flexibility/openness, (3) perceptual acuity and (4) personal autonomy.

Emotional Resilience

"People who are emotionally resilient tend to have a positive attitude. They are self-confident and can deal with ambiguity. They like new things, experiences, and situations and they are not overly concerned about making mistakes" (Kelly and Meyers, 1995, p. 14). Thus, an emotionally resilient student teacher will possess elasticity, the power to quickly recover and rebound from periods of discouragement and despair. This student teacher will continue to move forward to positively interact with the new culture.

Flexibility/Openness

The second dimension is flexibility/openness. Its common components are the individual's ability to possess a non-judgmental attitude and remain open-minded and other-centered when confronted with the thoughts and beliefs of others. It embraces, rather than rejecting, out-of-the-ordinary opportunities, keeping an open mind to new ideas, experiences, and people.

Perceptual Acuity

Perceptual acuity is individual cultural empathy (1995). Dinges describes this perceptual acuity as "the skill to understand the logic and coherence of other cultures and the restraint to avoid negative attributions based on perceived difference based on one's own and others' behavior" (as cited in Kelly and Meyers, 1995, p. 10). Its characteristics are restating to build dialogue, summarizing and asking non-threatening questions to

affirm understanding.

Personal Autonomy

Finally, personal autonomy is an individual's ability to possess and maintain a strong personal identity when placed in a new culture. One need not abandon a personal belief to fit in. In his article, "Cross-Cultural Savvy: Don't Go Abroad Without It", Gary Wederspahn (2001) discusses the invisible cultural baggage which we all carry while traveling/living abroad. This baggage is composed of values, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions and expectations. We are perceived and responded to based on our baggage contents and how we put them to use. Wederspahn (2001) states, "It is very valuable for expatriates to have a clear understanding of their own cultural identities because it allows them to anticipate how others are likely to react to them". In the chapter on 'What it means to be American', The University of Montana Study Abroad Handbook (2001) encourages each student going abroad to understand cultural baggage to "...help you understand the differing beliefs, practices, and ideas in your host culture". Merrill and Reid (1999) encourage thoughtful regard for others with the "need to consider the individuals you will be working with. Try to understand how they may react, how best to communicate with them and how best to work in ways that suit them as individuals". Cedarville University seeks to orient its overseas student teachers to the concepts of Kelly and Meyers (1995) before they leave for their cross-cultural experience. The adaptability inventory is administered and discussed individually with students. Areas of weakness are considered and suggestions made to strengthen those. Students attend a weekend pre-field orientation that further emphasizes the above four areas. Journaling topics covering these areas are explored, discussed and assigned. While students are away from the University, weekly contact is kept with the director via email. These journals are a major part of that weekly contact. Upon their return from the student teaching experience, an exit interview is held and specific journaling topics are discussed, clarified and reflected upon.

Student Journal Reflections

Emotional Resilience: Regaining the Balance

Common emotional threads running through stu-

dent journals are loneliness, fear, tears, life continuing without the student, and the feeling that their 'job' is difficult. Scripture, prayer, and meditation are helpful in dealing with the downside of the new experience. I would add that the process of putting feelings down in written form made "owning" those feelings and trying to find some resolution for them more of a possibility.

Stacey struggled with feelings of loneliness while in Switzerland. Even with new friends around, she admits to a 'woe is me' attitude. She expressed it this way: "these are some of the loneliest times I have ever had". As she read and meditated on the Psalms, her attitude and actions changed so that she had a positive progression through the cross-cultural experience.

Flexibility/Openness: Listening in a Non-judgmental Manner.

Joe student taught in Australia. He was challenged to live out his faith without being offensive to those in his host country. Being an exceptional conversationalist, it was easy to communicate his faith. Compassion, good judgment and active listening were important in the conversation, and when the opportunity presented itself, Joe shared his faith. Based on Philemon 1:6 there is a relationship between sharing one's faith and his own growth in the faith. Joe wrote: "...last night in Wellington I met a guy who is seriously struggling with his faith. I believe each one of these meetings is divinely arranged. After Shane dropped me off at the airport Saturday morning, I spent almost the whole plane flight talking with Andrew....He told me about the cool things to do in New Zealand, and he listened intently as our conversation turned to eternity and Jesus Christ. He asked me a dozen questions, about the Bible, my family, his present status with God, and what exactly happened to me on the day I was saved." For Brandon, it was the everyday things that became complex and required flexibility. He wrote: "I think the hardest things to cope with at the outset of the trip are, in retrospect, the most minor. At first I think the things that were terribly hard were things like drying my clothing, ... or needing to go to the store to pick up toothpaste. These things were tremendously hard, and one had to muster up some serious courage to attempt them. However, as I became more acclimated to my surroundings, less intimidated by the unknown strangers around me speaking an unknown language, and better at rudimentary Chinese, these...became

much easier.”

Brandon’s experiences led him to embrace, rather than reject difficulties. He kept an open mind to the “newness” of his culture and became flexible and bold enough to function in it.

Perceptual Acuity: Understanding Others.

Realizing that your host country has made a possible visa error that may cost you time, money and early departure from the country requires perceptual acuity. It took effort, skill and collaboration with members of the immigration service for Joe to sort out a situation when he discovered that he had the wrong visa and would need to leave Australia before completing student teaching. Joe was detained and interrogated at the Melbourne airport before it was decided that he should get a different visa allowing him to stay longer. After the complications, he wrote, “We rang them to sort it out, but they can’t do anything over the phone so I’ll have to take a train into the city...” Adding humor, Joe asked for prayer “... so that my 15 minutes of fame aren’t spent on ‘Australia’s Most Wanted.’” Staying positive and understanding required effort. Being genuinely attuned to the host country provided opportunity to resolve conflict and develop a solution to the problem.

Personal Autonomy: A Strong Identity

Allison was confronted with many challenges. In her weekly journaling it seemed that something always threatened her attitude. Rather than losing her objectivity, Allison expressed her struggles through writing and claimed her strong personal identity. She wrote: “The food is...an adjustment. It’s not bad food, it’s just that to buy groceries you can’t go to one huge store and buy them all. ...I really miss dressing for salads! ... I miss Ranch and French and Poppy Seed!!! The pizza here is also different. They don’t use pizza sauce. I can’t wait to go home and have real pizza!!!” “...When I go home, I can just get in my car and drive wherever I want to go! I don’t need to find a ride or call a taxi. I can...communicate with the people in my own language. That is going to be the...strange thing when I go home...being able to talk to people behind counters in English!”

Allison coped with living in Argentina because she

knew who she was. She held on to the familiar. She had a reference point. Allison broadened her own identity while away. After returning home to be married, she looked forward to future missions in a foreign country. Her journal entries indicate that her perceptual acuity is strong and will enable her to live and serve well in another culture.

Assessing Journals

The journaling process has been helpful in four areas at Cedarville. First, the overseas student teaching preparatory process was evaluated. Journaling helped identify the need to better assist student teachers to prepare to teach English as a second language. It has also helped identify the need for students to develop some basic language of the host country. The next area involves weekly checks on the physical, emotional and spiritual health of students. It is possible for students who are away for two and a half months to be struggling so deeply that intervention may be needed. Journaling allows regularly assessment in this area. If help is needed, the University can take steps based on objective information. Another area is assessing the quality of the learning environment for future student teachers.

Student teachers respond to questions that relate to the school environment. Gathering additional information about overseas schools through first hand information allows the University to determine if the school environment is healthy for future students. The last area has to do with gathering up-to-date weekly information on students’ actual learning process in the classroom. Frequently, students use and expand on the phrase, “I learned...” From week one to week ten, their growth can be tracked. Student feedback to journaling is positive. It keeps students connected to the University. It helps them focus on positives and whatever may be troubling them. It’s one opportunity to put their experiences in perspective. Within the context of a journaling question, students are encouraged to set aside time each week to write about their experiences and emotions. When they finish, they have a written record of their cultural, school and community insights. What they learn from their experiences is preserved for future reflection.

Conclusion

Student journaling encourages reflection on circumstances, environment, teaching experiences and spiritual growth. Journaling has served as a tool to allow students to pen their thoughts and emotions. The tool is a source of greater strength, awareness and hope. From a Biblical perspective, the process allows students to keep truth on the table of their lives by writing about it. Acknowledging, and then dealing with the truth of where they are on their journey, creates potential for growth and continued development.

Journaling! Growing saints through the ages have used it to help process joys, fears, hurts and unresolved pain on their faith journey. It works for modern saints, too!

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Brenda MacKay is a professor and coordinator of the student teaching abroad program at Cedarville University.