Cultural Learning and Adaptation
while Working for a Chinese Public School

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"Difference and novelty are exploding across the planet. The world has become restless. What only 20 years ago were stagnant communist monoliths are today dynamic economic powers" (Kramer, 2008, XVIII)

Abstract

Three years ago I began a journey of learning. What started off as a difficult adjustment to a new work and living environment in Beijing China ended up being a very rich experience that allowed me to absolutely enjoy my life in my new place of work and residence. The purpose of this paper, which is divided into four main sections, is to explore and reflect on my process of becoming culturally competent within my new environment.

I begin by briefly describing how I came to work in China, followed by a discussion of my context, which I consider through the lens of internationalization, privatization and globalization of education within China.

I then explore my experience through a variety of sociocultural theoretical frameworks, including the development of culture, communities of practice and identity. This is used to view and explain the process of learning, primarily using Fenwick's (2001) situative perspective and critical cultural perspective. Finally, I provide suggestions and recommendations for similar work environments.

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Background

I love living and working in Beijing, China. That statement would have shocked me upon my arrival, three years ago. Even though I had lived overseas before and had experience working with Chinese students, I was unaware of the learning required to adjust to working and living in Beijing. It was my choice to take a leave from my public school district in British Columbia, Canada to work with the development and delivery of an Advanced Placement (AP) US College Board program in China. I felt I was open-minded and prepared from previous overseas experience to take on a new challenge.

My professional interest in education and working overseas alongside my theoretical interest in understanding learning within a culturally diverse workplace developed throughout my masters studies at UBC. As I expanded my understanding of the historical and global changes within China alongside my theoretical understanding of globalization and socio-cultural learning, I began to appreciate my context and realize the extent to which my identity, especially within the workplace, is constructed as a North American, white, English-speaking and "culturally different" woman. I began considering the dynamic of foreigners working within a Chinese school; specifically the impact of a joint American-Chinese international program within a Chinese public high school. What began to stand out were the structures that created barriers between local and foreign teachers, the assumptions that I carried, and the binary thought of "us vs. them", a view that framed how I engaged in my workplace. Throughout this learning process, I have come to recognize that I had assumed my process was one of adapting to a workplace, high school education, that was similar to other contexts within which I had worked. I came to realize, however, that my new workplace was enveloped with layers of differences. These differences have been a catalyst for a unique and rich learning experience. The

differences I refer to might be broadly described as the unique aspects that are created when living away from one's home culture. In my case this included living in China and working in a Chinese public school with a culturally diverse international staff. Within this paper I will use a variety of literatures to understand my own learning process within this environment. More specifically, I will seek to understand what learning is required to "…effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture" (Taylor, 1994, p 154).

Within my last year and a half, I was able to travel between countries without a shocking entry on either side. Yet when I moved back to Canada a couple of months ago I was by no means fluent in Chinese, nor did I have what I would consider a complete understanding of the culture. I still had limitations in my participation: I still needed help if I needed to go to a Chinese hospital, for example. I am also fully aware of the limitations of my time in Beijing: three years is only the beginning of an experience that explores another culture. Yet friends and family who had visited me throughout my time remarked at how comfortable I had become and how competent I appeared in my environment. So, how did I learn to become "culturally competent" (Taylor, 1994)?

Before beginning my own discussion, I believe there is value in briefly looking at the concept of cultural competency. I have identified strongly with Taylor's (1994) theoretical framework of becoming "culturally competent". He identifies five distinct "… universal processes to successful adaptation and adjustment into a new culture" (Taylor, 1994, p 156) and focuses specifically on broad stages that cause transformative learning within a culturally different environment. The process begins by taking a close look at one's existing understanding of the world, which includes the values, truths and assumptions that have been developed through experience. This existing knowledge, otherwise known as meaning structures,

constantly changes throughout life. However, Taylor (1994) focuses specifically on learning processes that include the following:

1) Setting the stage for learning takes into account a person's previous overseas experience and how willing and able a person is to live in another culture

2) Experiencing cultural disequilibrium describes the disorienting experience caused when living in a new culture

3) Cognitive orientation deals with how a person handles cultural disequilibrium, mainly through non-reflective and reflective cognitive orientations

4) Behavioral learning strategies are the tools used to balance cultural disequilibrium

5) Evolving intercultural identity describes the process of being increasingly confident in the host culture. It often involves a change in values, and includes an ongoing process of *understanding perspectives* of the host culture: "Intercultural identity is evolving because there is always the potential for greater competency with each new intercultural experience" (Taylor, 1994, p 167)

My experience did involve all of the processes described above and I have found it useful to refer to them. I would agree in that becoming comfortable or competent within my life had to involve moving beyond the discomfort or frustrations that I encountered because of differences. It was only through a change in my perspective that I began a process of becoming comfortable with life in Beijing. Changing perspective involved encountering something new and sometimes just accepting it for what it was – different. Yet it was through a great deal of questioning, conversations with Chinese and foreigners in Beijing, research, and critical analysis of my environment that my perspective broadened or was re-shaped. This paper traces an accumulation

of learning processes and includes significant observations, conversations and experiences that caused me to question, research, discuss and/or analyze my environment.

Context

International Education in China

Throughout my masters studies, I began to appreciate the social, historical and economic dynamics that have shaped my context and made it possible for me to live and work in Beijing. Since China's 11th plenary session in 1978, the country has been opening its doors to the world. This has involved tremendous economic changes that have touched on many aspects of society, including education. From pre-school through to adult learning, the government of China has made an effort to increase its citizens' level of education, including the introduction of teaching methods from other parts of the world (Chen & Davey, 2008; Chinese Adult Education Association, 2008). One way to address this has been through the recruitment of foreign teachers by Chinese educational organizations (Yao & Lu, 2011), representing one component in a large picture that encompasses China's internationalization of education.

Due to limited literature written on the internationalization of high school education in China, I will use literature that has been written on the internationalization of post-secondary education as a base from which to discuss my current work context. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE), internationalization of education in China refers to the following activities:

Twinning: agreements between institutions in different countries to offer joint programs;

Franchises: an institution approves provision of one or more of its programs by a foreign institution in the latter's country;

Branch Campus: a campus set up by an institution in another country to provide its educational or training programs to foreign students;

Articulation: a system recognition by an institution of specified study at a foreign institution as partial credit toward completion of one or more of its programs

Study abroad: students from an institution travel to take courses at a foreign institution and to live in a different country for a fixed period of time (Zha, 2012, p 107-108)

Within my school, the international program did not fit neatly into any of the activities articulated above, but fell amongst them. Our public Chinese high school had approval from necessary Chinese ministries to establish an international center within a Chinese public school system and offer US-based College Board approved Advanced Placement (AP) curriculum. The curriculum offered at the high school level met graduation requirements with a mix of Chinese-based courses and a variety of English-based AP courses**.** This seemed to be a simple blend of course offerings, similar to my experience as an AP economics teacher within a Canadian public high school; however, as I became more familiar with it, I realized there were large differences that influenced my experience.

My existing school is considered to be public, but with $USD 12,000 tuition per year, it is a far cry from what constitutes 'public education' in Canada. This type of public system emerged as a result of policy changes that began to occur in the 1980's. As China opened up to the world and the demands for education increased, privatization was seen as a way to meet expanding educational needs of the country and at the same time alleviate the state of a massive financial burden (Zha, March 2006). Although high school programs are considered public, there are tuition fees. The rate paid depends on the type of program: an all-Chinese high school

will have minimal tuition but a public high school with a good reputation and international staff will charge a premium price.

This type of environment created a unique dynamic within the workplace. While teaching at a public school in Canada, my experience felt whole in that I was part of the school culture, part of the activities, and integrated within my community of colleagues. Within the Chinese public school, I was on the periphery within a public school. Being unable to participate fully, or feeling distinct from the community, created a unique learning experience. In this graduation paper, I am deepening my understanding of that experience by learning about the structural, historical, economic and cultural factors within my working context.

Peripheral Private Sector

As I read about private higher education and internationalization of education in China, the literature describing the scope of private educational influence on a country's overall system resonated with me. I realized that the international education offered at my school might considered what Geiger describes as a 'peripheral private sector' (as cited in Zha, 2006); that is, privatization with a limited role in the overall education picture in this particular school. In other words, the influence of "the private sector" on the larger education system is minimal. Although my school was considered public, the fees and 'eliteness' of our curriculum might have been considered private in the Western sense. Even as our program grew from four foreign staff to fifteen, I felt as though I had remained separate from the school community. This was mainly due to inability to participate within the school-wide events and the lack of information around what was going on at the broader level of our community. Examples of this were wide. It was

not unusual for us to hear about a school-wide event the day or two before. One year, our Friday schedule was changed so that staff could take part in school-wide team-building events, but foreign staff were never included on the pre-sign up email and all events were full by the time we saw it. At our weekly school-wide flag-raising events, foreign staff rarely understood what was going on because there was never any translation or information around what would be spoken about. The school did not attempt to provide any Chinese lessons to ease our transition within the community.

Reflecting on these types of interactions, the peripheral private sector concept resonated with me and helped shape my understanding of my context. Prior to this, I had resented not being included. This gave me insights to many of the interactions I had encountered in my workplace and it seemed give a broader perspective around why I had felt I was on the periphery.

Internationalization and Globalization of Education

By actually articulating and writing about the feeling of being on the periphery I began to ease my initial frustration of being excluded within my school. It seemed to provide reflective cognitive orientation (Taylor, 1994), or a new perspective, to the cultural disequilibrium that I was experiencing.   This was one important piece that helped me settle the uneasiness I had been feeling within my work environment. Understanding it provided a base from which I began to explore the internationalization of higher education and China's approach to globalization; both of which greatly expanded understanding my experiences and context.

As discussed previously, the focus of expanding programs with international curriculum has been a way to increase education and at the same time reduce the financial burden on the state. As Zha (2006) note "...the Chinese leadership are highly 'instrumental' in terms of creating more educational opportunities in response to emerging market needs" (p. 62). Furthermore, expanding educational programs at the public school level to include some international curricula could be considered an extension of the values of the existing system, rather than regarded as the adoption of external, market-driven or international beliefs around public education. China's goal of both expanding education while limiting international influence within public education at the high school level became clearer to me as I grappled with Holst's (2007) perspectives on globalization.

Holst (2007) describes two distinct perspectives of globalization including a "stronger version" and a "longer version". The "stronger version" of globalization highlights a perspective that dominates countries emphasizing neo-liberal policies including privatization, the diminishing of the nation state, and a shift of power to corporate interests. Many Western countries hold this type of perspective on globalization.

The "longer version" or Marxist perspective is quite different from the stronger version because it begins "...with the premise that capitalism from its beginning over 500 years ago has been based on international or global economic relations" (Holst, 2007, p.263). Instead of seeing neo-liberal policies as inevitable, the longer version views the movement of capital as a choice. It sees the flow of capital from the North to the South as an extension of the North, a choice that does not reduce the power of the nation-state, rather "...it is being given different tasks, but by no means necessarily fewer" (Holst, 2007, p. 264).

I believe that China's policies have supported the longer version. Even though the government has permitted a variety of international influences, it has ensured that the country holds on to key aspects of the economy. For example, China has been positioning itself in the accumulation of world capital and other key resources for the betterment of its own economy (Ali & Jafrani, 2007; CBC, 2012). The government still owns all land, foreign information is restricted, and fifteen 'Special Economic Zones' are designated for foreign direct investment (Dixin, 2012). Although control has been relaxed in the last decade, the movement of Chinese people to other cities is restricted by the "hukou" (household registration) system. In these ways, resource movement is highly influenced by the government.

As I became aware about different approaches to globalization, I wondered how that might relate to my peripheral participation within our school culture. Our knowledge and skills are welcomed, but they are also limited in their influence; foreign values are not necessarily meant to permeate the existing public school culture. This understanding has helped me begin to appreciate the structures and dynamics that exist beyond my school which may be contributing to my own experience in China.

Having a broad contextual understanding around my workplace has been a starting point to appreciating my experience in Beijing. Using this as a base, I will now use a variety of sociocultural theoretical frameworks to further explore my experience. The following section will examine my reflections around culture, communities of practice and identity as well as how these have contributed to my learning adjustment to life in China.

Sociocultural Frameworks and Experience

My Background

I was brought up in Saskatchewan, Canada by parents who had lived overseas as a young couple, encouraged travel, hosted multitudes of exchange students, and encouraged me as I made decisions to travel extensively and live overseas. I had lived and worked in other countries (Argentina, Germany), and as a young adult I learned to speak German and Spanish fluently. Seeking out opportunities to go overseas was something my parents and I valued. Although I had exposure to other countries, I was primarily socialized in one culture from which I made cultural comparisons.   This previous foreign experience enabled me to be what Taylor (1994) describes "learning ready" for a process of becoming culturally competent within China.

In China, my initial adjustment to the environment outside of work was a bit exhausting and overwhelming to my senses. Exhaustion came from learning some basic Chinese to get by, being stared at, bracing myself to go grocery shopping in a moving maze of people, being pushed with the masses both in and out of the subways, the smog, and hearing people snort and spit around me. Furthermore, not being able to communicate with anyone, having taxis pass me by, ordering food at a restaurant and getting something that did not resemble what I thought I had ordered, all added to the challenge. Although the most evident differences seemed to be racial and language, I began to wonder if there were other pieces around culture that explained my experience. All I knew was that I felt culturally isolated and, for the first time in all of my travels and living overseas, very dependent on others to adjust to my life in new surroundings, or my new context.

Living in China was very different when compared to my experience in Germany and Argentina. Being a white North American English speaking woman was not novel or unusual in either of those countries for various historical reasons; Europe has influenced Canada and Argentina with the immigration of people, values and beliefs. In both countries, I was able to blend in physically and when my language skills improved I would often pass as being German or Argentinean. I was able to move with relative ease and feel comfortable within a short period of time. It was only through living in China that my positionality (Takacs, 2003) as a white North American English speaking woman came to the forefront.

Culture

In the first six months of living in the northwest part of the city, an area west of Shang Di, I did not see one other white person outside of my school. Being a blond female, I was obvious. People stopped to stare at me, they watched me eat at restaurants, took pictures of me and, on rare occasion, petted my hair when I was distracted looking for something in a store. While difficult, being racially different also allowed me to make mistakes and it gave me leverage in a multitude of situations, otherwise known within my foreign community as "playing the white card": a position of power. The idea that "...cultures are not equally regarded..."(Guy, 1999, p. 10) began to take root; I was able to get away with situations such as making mistakes in public and accessing areas for which Chinese people needed passes.

I was uncomfortable with the attention and the inequality that being white seemed to allow. I began to see that I was privileged in a way that I had not experienced in either Germany or Argentina and I began to wonder how that played into my own experience. Being white set me a part as different and I often overheard Chinese people say that they thought I was an American.

This feeling of being alone and standing out somehow created an air of privilege over the Chinese people around me. "North American" was in high demand, and that was reflected in how foreign teachers were treated. I have attempted to keep the influence of being white in mind as I explore the concept of culture.

Using Nasir & Hand's (2006) analysis around culture, I have been able to further understand my feeling of isolation beyond physical differences. According their theory, the development of culture can be viewed as learning process that occurs over long periods of time, created in activity with others. It supports the idea that learning is activity-based, socially constructed and bound in local contexts shaped by historical factors. As activity takes place "...culture is carried by individuals and created in moment-to-moment interactions with one another as they participate in (and reconstruct) cultural practices" (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p. 450). "Artifacts" are developed over to time (language, symbols, tools, etc.) to accomplish tasks (Nasir & Hand, 2006) which eventually create "...socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, [and] institutions..." (Guy, 1999, p.7).

Keeping the idea of developing culture in mind, my understanding of isolation changed. I was initially exposed to and overwhelmed by a different set of patterns of activities that define the Chinese culture, including a foreign language and seemingly impossible characters to decipher. Furthermore, many of my cultural patterns, including the beliefs, values and norms from my own culture, were no longer valuable or useful within this context; indeed they seemed to stop my participation. Yet this feeling of being incongruent with my environment, otherwise known as 'cultural disequilibrium' (Taylor, 1994) created a catalyst for learning. I began Mandarin lessons. Chinese staff at school were invaluable in helping me find out how to deal with everyday tasks such as buying electricity for my apartment or bargaining at the local

markets on my own. I learned the nuances of how to catch a cab and the patience required to transfer money back to Canada.

Theorizing culture also helped me come to terms with understanding that the school system surrounding me was saturated in historical social construction of meaning and patterns that defined my local context. This included activities such as a weekly flag raising ceremony, teachers rotating to set classrooms with a central office where students came to ask questions, student-organized custodial care of homerooms, and students studying (at our school) from 7:30 am – 9:30pm, Monday-Friday. I began to appreciate the culture that envelopes daily activities and see them beyond my initial impression of being curious, novel or backward.

Appreciating the effect of culture on my situation expanded as I grappled with my experience of contradictions: I was accepted in some situations and rejected in others. I was not only racially different, but I also possessed what Nasir and Hand (2006) describe as cultural capital: "...cultural and symbolic capital that is differentially valued by the broader society and its institutions" (p. 453). Cultural capital goes beyond race and includes aspects of my culture that were shaped by my socialization and life experience in another culture. This includes concepts such as broad values and behaviors that shaped my automatic reactions and assumptions of how things should be done. As a foreigner, some of my cultural capital was a definite asset to my school; as a teacher I had experience teaching the same curriculum that held teaching practices and values of the Canadian system. This was highly valued when marketing our school's international program. Yet layered into that was privilege of being North American and being white. Not only did I have the desired North American teaching methodologies, values, language and accent, I also looked the part and was featured on brochures, posters and other marketing materials. I was never asked to have my pictures used and I was not comfortable

feeling as though I was somewhat of a marketing tool, yet I had an appreciation that it helped to establish and create a legitimate international reputation.   That being said, my positionality also created situations where my cultural capital was not highly valued. This mainly occurred when I developed new programs and material which did not suit the values and norms of my workplace. (This will be expanded upon on pages 25 and 26)

As I reflected on my own culture I now understand why I craved communication with people with whom I could relate.   In the beginning of my experience in Beijing, I would often make a trip by taxi to our school's main campus, approximately 30 minutes away. I hated where I lived and I was constantly in a cab, on a bus, in the subway trying to flee the northern part of the city to have some sort of contact with a world that would somehow allow me to feel myself. I had never lived in a place where I was such a physical minority, in a place where I did not relate whatsoever to my surroundings. Never had I felt so alone and unable to manage. China was a wash of culture to my senses and I tried to look at ways to make sense of it all so that I could adapt to the environment. Admittedly, for the first time in my life, I began to have an appreciation of the experience racial minorities face when living in a Eurocentric culture.

Being in cultural disequilibrium, I began to engage in a process of creating networks of support in order "...to establish (or reestablish) and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment" (Kim, 2003, 259). My understanding these networks of support was deepened by my reading about communities of practice which I now turn to.

Community of Practice

Part of moving overseas unplugged me from my network and the familiarity of the known. This was not a new experience for me and I realized I would need to start fresh with colleagues and build up a community outside of school. Reflecting on my own experience, I believe that much of my learning to function and enjoy life in Beijing has involved the interaction and development of support within what Wenger (2008) describes as communities of practice.

Wenger (2008) describes the fact that we are all involved in multiple communities of practice in places such as home, work, in our hobbies and in our schools. They are made up of people in pursuit of individual goals, not necessarily the goals of companies, institutions or schools. In other words, it is the network that we establish to be able to succeed in what we are trying to accomplish; be it personal or professional. It includes collective learning that creates networks of people who help one succeed, various endeavors such as figuring out how to do a new task at work or, as in my case, figuring out how to live in a country that is completely unfamiliar. These are the communities which help us organize our lives so that we can "...develop or preserve a sense of [ourselves] we can live with, have some fun, and fulfill the requirements of [life]" (Wenger, 2008, p 6).

In the beginning of my experience, the school was new, all the employees were new (both Chinese and foreign), but we all brought with us our own backgrounds and experience. We were operating within a system that already had its own socially constructed artifacts, artifacts which reflected a school culture and also a broader Chinese educational system: "Not only do the activities themselves embed values and perspectives, but the tools, artifacts, and norms within practices also reflect broader structures and perspectives" (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p. 466).

Daily activities such as eye exercises and military training were new to me as was the system where students progress through high school with the same class or cohort. Many of them lived in dorms and endured fourteen-hour school days. All of these dimensions reflect a complex set of socially constructed practices that were part of the culture embedded within the school.

As the foreign and Chinese staff worked together, I saw the development of a unique way of doing things that defined our international center. Through time, we established "ways of doing" our jobs that incorporated all of our unique experiences, backgrounds and assumptions around work. We negotiated not only how to work with one another, but also how to work within an international school embedded within a Chinese public school system. I see these as reflections of what Wenger (2008) describes as reification, that is, the experience of producing objects or concepts that give meaning and understanding to our workplace. For example, we negotiated or created procedures or documents such as exam procedures, report card forms, ways of communicating with Chinese parents and ways of handling student issues that are unique to us and enabled us to do our jobs.

This process of learning within a culturally diverse context was dynamic. Not only did the staff change over the three years, but our unique school culture was reflective of broader cultural changes within China that are "...constantly indexing their own development" (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p. 465). In a way, our school culture mirrored the broad cultural change that occurs within any country experiencing an increasing number of international exchanges and partnerships.

Two Communities of Practice

Describing the community of practice in this way might suggest a tidy, fluid and easy process. However, the structural differences in the way foreigners work and live compared to Chinese staff created two communities of practice.

Over the years, a foreign community of practice developed and saw different members come and go, each leaving his or her mark depending on the degree of individual participation. This community consisted of men and women, between the ages of mid-twenty and sixty, who originally came from Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Nepal, Pakistan and the United States. Of the fifteen foreign staff in my final year, eleven were Caucasian. All of us were educated within his/her own educational system, with different expectations around what "good learning" was and what high school education should look like. Some of the members had never lived in a foreign country before, some were married to Chinese people and had children in the country, and others had already lived and traveled extensively. Although we were from different foreign backgrounds, we were bound together as a unique social group, differentiated by our "...cultural forms, practices, [and] way of life" (Young, 1990, p 43). Through our difference we shared a similar experience of being foreign and we supported one another as we made adjustments both personally and professionally within a different work and living environment.

Along with the foreign teachers, I observed that the Chinese teachers had very different work requirements within our joint American-Chinese center. Never had I taught with professional "equals" who were not treated equally. For example, foreign staff had fewer working hours, earned substantially more money, and had different obligations outside of school. Chinese staff were obligated to do a rotated evening study duty with the students. In addition, Chinese teachers had weekend staff meetings, evening school meetings, extra meetings with the

international American principal addressing teaching practices, and intermittent meetings with parents. There were occasional dinners as a mixed staff, but minimal interaction occurred in a more organic way. Our international high school was marketed as an official "joint" Chinese-American program, but the staff worked under separate contracts and had different expectations and responsibilities.

Within this environment, the idea of "other" (Davies 2002) was evident in our language as well as in our actions. "Other" exists "...in discourses about fundamental social divisions of class, gender and race, where a dominant group defines what is valued and what is normal by reference to itself and hence excludes and oppresses others" (Davies, 2002, p 32). My experience within my work environment indicated that there were two communities of practice existing within the workplace. The mere fact that foreigners "came in" to a Chinese public system to enhance the Chinese educational system created an "us vs. them" conversation with respect to superior knowledge and expertise around education. We were in a position of privilege and my own discussions around education and how to educate reflected that. As an example, I have an excerpt from my journal in the first year of working in Beijing:

> *"To Cheat or Not to Cheat…that was our question…Oh, what the heck, just cheat & let's all hold hands and sing kum-ba-ya.*
>
> *Are we all just suspicious skeptics from the West? I just finished a 1.5hr meeting with Chinese colleagues…finalizing the procedures for our final exams in July. What would've been "non-discussion" in a Western school became a philosophical debate ending in total frustration. The core of it all – how to prevent cheating in an exam environment…and, (wouldn't you know it) there were 2 sides. The Chinese side wants to create an atmosphere of trust by educating students around the seriousness of cheating. The mainly Western side also wants to have the pre-exam discussion, but also include clear rules around what is allowed/not allowed in a final exam (no cellular phones, big jackets, iPhones, for example).*
>
> *China: not allowing cellular phones or not having students empty their pockets prior to an exam is against Chinese law for children…an atmosphere of trust should be created so that students will not want to cheat. Listing what they cannot do is too harsh. Also,*

let's include the students in this conversation so that they know the teachers aren't in agreement…!…

The West: make clear rules (no cellular phones, etc.). Clear the deck. It's an exam. They are the children. Children need to know the lines. They can make choices knowing those lines.

Bell rang.

Seriously? Did I really write this?

…and China wonders why we are always suspicious around grades coming out of this part of the world…

Time to sing Kum-ba-ya"

Even though I had a sense of this happening, recognizing how "othering" was occurring did not become clear to me until I viewed it through a specific incident at work, which I will call my "Hot Issue". After approximately six months of working at our center I had an experience which left me completely frustrated. I can now reflect on my struggles and see it as another example of cultural disequilibrium (Taylor, 1994) that created a catalyst to understanding the impact of China's globalization policies on a local level. It also enabled me to understand how my identity as a foreigner had been reinforcing "other".

My "Hot Issue" began as I created a student project with a former Canadian colleague of mine involving online dialogue between Chinese students in Beijing and Canadian students in Burnaby, British Columbia. In the midst of it, I encountered a bit of a shock that hit the core of how I had previously taught in Canada. Up until this point, teaching had been very easy in China as the students were so very polite and respectful. The following is an excerpt from my journal about that incident:

"After approximately one month, I was pulled aside by a Chinese administrator of our international school and she said she wanted to talk to me regarding a class that contained an online project with Canada. She was in a rush to go to the weekly school flag-raising ceremony, so we hopped into the elevator together. As we rode the elevator she said that the project was a good idea, but "do not criticize the government". She just wanted to "warn me" and then she emphasized that I was the one responsible; she said that I needed to be careful and there could be no criticizing of the government during the project.

This comment seemed to have come out of nowhere. I was shocked and stunned and I didn't know what she really meant: Had the students been criticizing online? Had I said something wrong? Had I unknowingly criticized the government? Were we starting to ask too many questions in my class? Could I ask questions? Could my students ask questions about environmental policies in China? Should I stop the project all together? I began to ask some of the above questions to her, to which she responded, "Don't worry. So far it's ok"; she wanted to talk to me about it "just in case"; but then she repeated that I needed to make sure our discussions remained neutral and not critical of the government. I asked where this comment came from and she just shook her head and said it was just important that we did not criticize.

The door opened and we went onto the marching field where all the uniformed students lined up neatly. I stood there silently, the Chinese flag was raised and a man on a megaphone barked out instructions to the students. I stood there feeling the sense of a Communist party, boxed in and suffocated, feeling like I had hit the "great wall" that would stop the way I naturally teach. I also felt incredibly angry for my students, who were in a system that would not allow them to make observations of their world, draw their own conclusions or engage in critical thinking. I wanted to leave China"

The incident was frustrating for me because of all the effort I had made to connect students between countries, coordinate curriculum and create a student-driven learning environment. I felt it closed me in as a teacher and diminished what I could do with my students. It also fueled my own beliefs that we, the foreigners, were far better for having freedom of thought and expression. It set apart who I was as an educator versus who "they" were: the Chinese, the Eastern culture, and even the communist system. I ended up stopping the project with my Canadian colleague, mainly because it seemed too daunting to figure out the vague nuances of what the system would allow and what it would not allow. I never had clear answers to the questions that I needed in order to set up the project and, as my American principal was

also as new as I was, he had no clear answers either. I eventually stopped the project and concentrated more on building a life outside of work, where I was beginning to find connection and purpose outside of what I felt to be a restrictive workplace.

As frustrating as this incident was, it became a catalyst in supporting my understanding of China's approach to globalization. It may not be the entire reason behind my Chinese colleague's decision to speak to me, as there could have been many influences, including personal and professional choices. Yet, the fact that a line had been established around a collaborative inquiry-based learning project reinforced the concept of peripheral influence within a Chinese public school environment. My presence and approach to teaching economics had been welcomed and completely supported up until this point; yet a definite line existed. Although I might not have agreed with my colleague's approach or the approach China has to globalization, by viewing it through the lens of the longer version of globalization, the incident was no longer personal. In fact, it might have been reflection of a much larger cultural, political and economic picture that touches all of China.

My "hot issue" also provided a platform to understand how my identity was established and its influence on my experience at work, a topic that I now turn to in the next section.

Understanding Identity and Learning through Identity

As a teacher working in an international center embedded within a Chinese public school I had an identity that was different than it would have been in Canada. This supports Watson's (2006) discussion that identities are not fixed, rather "necessarily relational" which have "no fixed point of reference..." (Watson, 2006, p. 210). Chappell et al. (2003) also highlight this in

their discussion around self and the need for relationship to realize 'self': "...selves [are] realized only as a by-product of relatedness" (p. 15). In other words, we are all part of communities and places of work, interacting and forming relationships that are necessary in identity formation: "…participation is a source of identity (Wenger, 2008, p 56). Keeping this in mind, in the following I discuss how my professional identity emerged. I have framed my analysis using the theories of Watson (2006), Wenger (2008), and Davies (2002).

Watson (2006) describes the act of drawing on available resources to construct identity. The framework of resources he uses are biographical (*e.g. childhood experience, previous work experience*), professional knowledge (*e.g. specific theory and learning in a discipline*), and context (*e.g. both current and historical*). My life experience mainly draws on biographical, professional and contextual Canadian or North American resources. This provides the base to the enactment of my identity: I am a North American teacher within my current workplace. The way in which I negotiated my identity may also be connected to Nasir and Hand's (2006) concept of the development of cultural capital, as many of the broad values and beliefs I carried were influenced by the socialization process I had while living in Canada.

Although Canadian, my sense is that in China the identity I negotiated through my relationships was more foreign than necessarily Canadian. Wenger (2008) describes the shaping of identity through modes of belonging which include engagement and alignment. The most influential engagement of activity in which I was able to fully participate, contribute to and become competent within were communities made up of a variety of foreigners. I was connected to an overarching understanding of what is it to be foreign in China and, as a result, I aligned my actions and activities toward that end.

Another way in which my identity as a foreign teacher can be viewed is to build on the

discussion of 'othering' (Davies 2002). Our foreign international center consisted of 15 foreign

teachers within a Chinese school that had approximately 50 Chinese staff and administrators.

My historical background, mine being foreign and theirs being Chinese was a fundamental

difference that helped to create an 'other'; a process that supported difference due to our

language, where we come from and what we valued. In discussion with other foreign staff, this

binary thinking was further supported because of some experiences of exclusion. As described

within the previous discussion of periphery, foreign staff were often left out of school events, or

when invited, it was often last minute or vague around the details, creating a feeling amongst

many of the foreign staff that we are not really wanted at the event.

The reinforcement of how I negotiated my identity also occurred through my online

project with my Canadian colleague. My frustration was initially toward my Chinese

representative, whom I felt did not understand or respect the importance of inquiry-based

learning. I "othered" her into a general Chinese-Communist category, as a separate and foreign

culture from my own; something that I did not agree with and judged for its 'narrow-

mindedness' and 'backwardness'. As I reflected upon my work environment, I saw the

pervasiveness of the "us" vs. "them" conversation and how it influenced decisions in how we

interacted and cooperated with Chinese staff. I began to see that our identity of being

foreign"...sets a boundary, stresses the differences between people rather than their similarities

and connections" (Davies, 2002, p. 32).

My identity was continually being negotiated as I learned how to adjust to life in China.

As time passed, my experience accumulated historical, contextual and biographical resources

(Watson 2006) within Beijing. I drew upon them in my day-to-day life and that also affected the

evolution of my identity as a teacher. I was still a white, North American teacher but who I

became expanded to include so much more. For example, by the end of my second year I had to stop my Chinese colleagues from "speaking for me" in taxis or when ordering food. I became competent to handle most activities, both inside and outside of work. Given this spectrum of behavioral change, I wonder if my identity as a foreign teacher contributed to my Chinese administrator's warning. Perhaps this might have been her way to educate a new, North American colleague about her own culture. When she spoke to me, I was only in my first six months of living in China and that at that point of my experience I did not know much about work and life in Beijing. Her warning may have been influenced by the fact that I was a person who had not yet experienced enough to understand the cultural nuances of working within the Chinese education system.

The Meaning of Learning

After an analysis of my context including the effects of culture on the dynamics of my workplace, I was in a position to look at what learning meant to me. For this, I draw on Fenwick's (2001) theoretical discussion on experiential learning, specifically from the situative perspective and the critical cultural perspective. Both of these perspectives are used to understand how adults learn when constructing meaning through experience; a process that "…embraces reflective as well as kinesthetic activity, conscious and unconscious dynamics…" (Fenwick, 2001, p 1). During my time in China, I had the opportunity to participate within my context and reflect on experience through casual conversations with friends and colleagues, but also through academic courses. The opportunity to use theory to ground my understanding of context as well as to reflect on culture and identity have provided deep learning and a broad

understanding. I have constructed meaning of this experience "…through reflection [and] a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from [my] action in the world" (Fenwick, 2001, p 2). My learning has become concrete through traceable moments in which I knew I was the learner. These moments might be viewed through two specific learning perspectives: the situative perspective and critical cultural perspective (Fenwick 2001).

Situative Perspective of Learning

Much of my learning occurred as a result of participation with communities of practice which supports the view of learning within the situative perspective "…[learning] is rooted in the situation in which a person participates…" (Fenwick, 2001, p 34). The objective of learning within this perspective is "...to become a full participant in the community of practice, not to learn about the practice" (Fenwick, 2001, p 34).

As teachers, we learned everyday by simply interacting with each other and we "...[became] embedded in the culture in which the knowing and learning have meaning..."(Fenwick, 2001, p. 35). Our learning was not limited to work. As individuals we also brought to our community the day-to-day life learning we had gained through trial and error as we navigated our way throughout the city (finding ways to navigate busses, medical help in English, getaways that could be reached by bicycle). This learning was invaluable and enabled me to move beyond that community and participate in other meaningful activities. For example, I sang with an international chorus and I ran with a local international/Chinese running club, both with whom I developed communities of practice in which collective learning took place. This learning "…reflect[ed] both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations" (Wenger, 2008, p 45). It was through the foreign-based communities consisting of foreigners and

Chinese people that I began to embrace Beijing and open my understanding of my context beyond the confines of my school community. Learning within the situative perspective supported my understanding that "…adults don't' learn from experience, they learn in it" (Fenwick, 2001, p 35).

The situative learning perspective was also useful in observing how the classroom culture created by my students and me transformed over time. My students attested to the fact that I was "different" in how I taught within the classroom, compared to a "typical" Chinese teacher. I carried my own teaching style that embodied my "cultural capital". Within this exist my "...perspectives and values" (Nasir & Hand, 2006, 465). Feedback from them around difference included comments such as interactive lessons, an approach that allowed for mistakes and choice in assignments. However, as they got used to my teaching, my practice was also influenced as I adapted to a general difference I noticed in their classroom interaction with me. This difference, I will describe with a brief summary of my first day of teaching experience.

My first day, I used an opening lesson that had always been a hit in Canada involving a fun ice-breaking activity, theory that grounded the activity, and a small assignment to reflect on what it meant to them. Although they proceeded at a slower pace due to language, I could see they were having fun and understood what to do. Their feedback also indicated that they understood the theory. But the small application assignment left them baffled and asking a multitude of questions geared toward giving me the "right" answer. As I reflected on how they struggled, I attempted similar activities in the first few months, but decided to give more guidance and slowly wean them off of "the right answer". I also learned to teach to some of their strengths; as a whole, I noticed that they enjoyed the intellectual engagement of theory and,

at times, would sit in silence for minutes on end, looking at the white board intently, questioning their table partner (or me) if they didn't understand.

As I got to know them and they got to know me, they became comfortable in applying theory to their understanding of the world, not always looking for the "right" answer and I learned to pace my teaching to allow time for students to grapple with the intellectual pursuit of understanding fairly complex economic theory. Through the engagement in the practice of teaching and learning, I adapted and transformed my approach and my students became more comfortable with a variety of teaching methods.

Critical Cultural Perspective

I also drew on Fenwick's (2001) critical cultural perspective to frame my learning experience as I began to recognize the "…structures of dominance that express or govern the social relationships and competing forms of communication and cultural practices…" (p.39) that occurred within my living and working environment. Before learning about my identity and how that plays into the creation of two communities of practice at my workplace, I navigated through my work and personal life with politeness toward my Chinese counterparts, but also with judgment toward the obvious differences that existed.

As foreign staff within a Chinese public high school, we had an unspoken professional status that was considered superior to our Chinese counterparts. In this process we were "… seduced into believing and constructing for ourselves an illusory autonomous, coherent, stable self that fits dominant culturally approved categories of identity" (Fenwick, 2001, p. 43). In our case, our identity as foreigners gave us some privilege as educators brought into a Chinese public school to assist in education. Our discussions around education were considered more

progressive or more advanced than our Chinese counterparts, resulting in a dominant discourse around our profession in China. For example, when questions come up around working with Chinese students, often our first reaction was to discuss it amongst the foreigners and not include a Chinese staff member who might be sitting amongst us in the office. Binary thought, creating power relationships between foreign and Chinese staff, was established. Sadly, as Davies (2002) poignantly states "...the very act of establishing [our] identity devalues and demeans [theirs]..." (p. 32).

Being aware of this dominance added to my reflection around the power dynamic within my classroom. As I got to know my students and how they learned, I was given a glimpse into a rich Chinese pedagogical history that, I believe, is highly undervalued. Within my classroom, I saw the ability of students to manipulate complex theory and calculations that left me and my other foreign colleagues baffled. I often wondered how Chinese students have been taught to learn and, on occasion, I would discuss this with both my Chinese and foreign colleagues. We never did have an opportunity to explore this topic because there was so much emphasis on Chinese teachers observing foreign teaching methods; specifically around how to create active classroom engagement. I believe we missed an opportunity to equally share and exchange the depths of our pedagogies. This paper is too limited in scope to address this aspect of working in China, but I feel I would be remiss if it were not acknowledged or mentioned within my analysis.

I was also able to recognize other structures of dominance within my school environment. For example, because of language and culture, Chinese staff were able to be a part of the school community in a way foreign staff could not.   Foreign staff often missed what was going on in the school because of the inability to read Mandarin. We were also often left out of school initiatives or events because of the inability to understand casual conversations happening

amongst Chinese staff in the office.

Because of my learning around dominance, I began to engage in discussion with both foreign and Chinese colleagues around their views on our workplace. Were there in fact two communities of practice? How did they see that existing? Did it matter to them? There was agreement of their existence and candid individual discussion took place around how that made both foreign and Chinese staff feel. There was expressed willingness by those who engaged in discussion to try different ways of bridging some of our differences. Individual decisions to cross cultural lines began, not necessarily as a result of my discussions, but through a multitude of factors. For example, one of the leaders of the Chinese staff who spoke minimal English approached me to co-coordinate a North-American "style" winter carnival with her and a group of students. In my third year, the foreign principal made a point to tell the foreign staff that it was important that we all take part in the weekly flag raising ceremony, as it showed respect for our work environment and solidarity for all staff. I purposely moved my office location to sit closer to Chinese staff so that I might get to know them better and I made an effort to default to Chinese colleagues around questions that affected our students. Those small changes, along with new foreign staff who had a background and comfort level of working within China, continued to shape our ever-changing community of practice. "Othering" still occurred, but was no longer a dominant underlying discourse. This points to the fact that our experience of learning within the critical cultural perspective allows for naming cultural power and "with resistance people can become open to unexpected, unimagined possibilities for work, life and development" (Fenwick, 2001, p 39).

The presence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) within the structure of our school also created another dominant structure that governed cultural practices within my workplace.

The CCP determined educational content and school policies. The critical cultural perspective allowed me to understand how all staff are affected by this power dynamic; it was not an "us" vs. "them" dynamic necessarily. In fact, all of us had to learn to navigate within a system involved in activities such as censoring our learning materials. For example, the ministry of education never announced the exact beginning or end of the school year; we went by 'hearsay' on previous years. Our schedule often changed during the year, last minute, and when that happened we never really knew what the school day would be, making it very difficult to plan or pace lessons. In my first year, my own school mandated all staff to be back four days before holidays were over for a mandatory meeting in which our time was spent on discussing vacations.

Being in a system that waits for government decisions was an issue for both Chinese and foreign staff. In a way, the dominance of the CCP could be described as a dynamic "…of control that [is] hidden or unrecognized and often complied with and exercised by the subjects of the control" (Fenwick, 2001, p 40). Foreign staff, especially the new staff, were generally very vocal about the difficulties it presented. When I spoke to Chinese staff, they generally smiled and shrugged. They spoke to me about it with a knowing acceptance; acceptance of a system in which they had always operated and, most likely, would remain throughout their personal and professional lives.

Although we worked within this system with different reactions, we learned to address it within a negotiated enterprise (Wenger, 2008), individually and collectively. This involved finding ways to navigate the known and unknown behavior of a very present political culture. Foreign staff helped new staff in normalizing it and in making decisions that allowed for us to collectively negotiate a response "..to what [we] understand to be [our] situation" (Wenger,

2008, p 78) . For example, in subsequent years, the foreign staff refused to fly back during holidays to have a meeting that involve vacation debriefings. The Chinese and foreign staff occasionally coordinated or planned our potential "re-enforcement" or "write-off" lessons for times when our schedule changed last minute. It was an organic process of collaboration, without confrontation, as there is an unspoken acceptance that we were in this together. This does not mean that our workplace was void of binary thought or that we operated as one cohesive community of practice by the end of my experience. Foreign staff still had to collaborate separately because of curriculum limitations and foreign teachers also continued to have different work demands and living conditions.   However, my observations and analysis have begun a conversation that acknowledges the realities and recognizes the possibilities that a culturally diverse workplace brings.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Working within any environment has challenges, layered with individuals bringing in different life experiences, cultural and professional backgrounds and expectations around work. However, given the uniqueness of my former work environment I would like to offer some suggestions that may help foreign and Chinese staff participate and contribute to the workplace.

Prior to working within a Chinese public school, foreign staff would greatly benefit from general language courses and cultural information, including information on China's education system, its structure, history as well as Confucian views about education. The school could greatly improve the ability for foreigners to contribute and feel a part of the community by looking at areas that are still exclusively Mandarin, such as translating school-wide events into English.

Moreover, I do believe that there is great value in creating an adult learning environment that educates foreign staff and Chinese staff toward a more inclusive work environment. As the world continues to connect globally, there are exciting opportunities to open up and learn. But with that comes the need to understand the complexity of adjustment as people attempt to survive, connect with new environments and flourish. I would like to briefly propose some suggestions that my school may want to employ to begin thinking about this process. They may provide assistance to foreigners when adjusting to a new work environment and provoke discussion amongst all staff, including Chinese staff, around being thoughtful within a culturally diverse work environment.

Adult Education Series

Every year, the staff changes somewhat, which could provide an opportunity to create a fresh start to a learning experience within a school. This series, meant for all staff, would be meant to provide a base of understanding and respect in the field of education. The hope would be that it might address potential binary thought processes and behaviors before they start, or minimize those that currently exist.

This would involve both Chinese and foreign staff in a series of meetings throughout the school year. It would be meant to create an environment which allows for people to "...recall, value, talk about, and perhaps critically analyze their own past experience to construct knowledge from it (Fenwick, 2002, p. 14). The initial purpose of the series would be to learn about the Chinese educational system, its founding beliefs, and the changes that have occurred. However, I also see this type of series as space for both Chinese and foreign staff to share their professional experience around education. Providing a platform for initial discussion around experience in education may allow people to appreciate the perspectives of individuals,

regardless of their background. This type of activity might allow for learning of a variety of pedagogical backgrounds, both Eastern and Western.

Workplace Learning Partner

Another possible strategy may be to create learning partners between foreign and Chinese staff. The structural differences within the workplace are not flexible, but an effort to minimize binary thought may be possible by getting to know each other personally and professionally within the work environment. This strategy involves both a situative learning approach as well as a critical cultural approach.   The idea would be to provide a platform for foreign and Chinese staff to learn from one another, rather than separately. It may also bring about new projects or interdisciplinary classroom work. Involvement together on an interdisciplinary project between a foreign and Chinese teacher might minimize "...center power as a core issue inexperience" (Fenwick, 2002, p. 39).   Working together, rather than separately, might also merge or inhibit the development of separate communities of learning and reduce binary thought.

This suggestion also reflects the situative perspective of learning, as it allows staff to "...contribute to the ongoing network of meanings and collective action" (Fenwick, 2002, p. 36) as well as develop a future together within a culturally diverse workplace. Approaching work together might develop new practices "...in highly improvisory ways in response to a problem or difficulty" (Fenwick, 2002, p. 36).   Situative learning is also supported because of the authenticity of the activity and the ability to build on prior knowledge within the current context of work.

Conclusion

This paper is just the beginning of many conversations around learning within a culturally diverse workplace in a Chinese public school. I am sure that many of the topics I have grappled with will continue to develop as I adjust to my life back in Canada. My discussion is by no means exhaustive; instead it has attempted to trace and highlight an accumulation of my learning processes that have allowed me to experience intercultural competency within my life in Beijing. Even as I write, I am very aware of continued learning within this field, specifically with Western and Eastern pedagogy, educational philosophies and policy changes within the field of international education. How my experience in Beijing has shaped my perspective is still unknown to me. For example, I imagine I will have a new appreciation of working with cultural minorities and I am curious how that will unfold as I begin working in Burnaby this fall.

Through experience of cultural difference my quest for meaning began. Meaning occurred because I simply wanted to understand and move through the uncomfortable moments and difficulties. Critical analysis that combined learning about my context and becoming aware of binary thought and reinforcement of "other" created a platform for understanding my identity. Becoming conscious of this changed my perspective. It gave me an appreciation of who I was, the complexity of my experience and it also allowed me to be open to possibilities outside of a perceived "us vs. them" work environment. I realize now that it required continual negotiation of workplace dynamics that made it so exhausting and, at the same time, so exciting. As Kramer (2008) so succinctly puts it: "If people truly wanted equilibrium, they would not change" (XVII).

My participation grew from a community of practice that consisted of a small group of foreigners, to an extensive community of foreign and Chinese colleagues and friends. Judgment around my work and living environment and criticism of the Communist Party of China began to

soften through a meaning-making experience that connected my perspective of the world with understanding my new context. This supports Taylor's (1994) discussion that "…the process of becoming interculturally competent lies in the concept of perspective transformation" (p. 158). Upon leaving China, my colleagues were no longer "other" to me because they had become friends. I now appreciate the depth of history that existed within my Chinese context as well as why I felt as though I had been on the periphery of my working environment.

Through discussions with colleagues and friends, often prompted by reflection on literature, I was given the opportunity analyze China's approaches to globalization, the effects of that on my workplace, and how that interplays with the fact that I am a North American foreign teacher. Learning has meant experience, participation, and critical reflection of the role I played within my environment. Through this, the perspectives around how I viewed China changed: "When we change significant meaning structures (meaning perspectives), we change the way we view and act toward our world…" (Taylor, 1994, p 158).

As I finish writing this paper on holiday in Saskatchewan, Canada, I am appreciative of the rich journey of learning that has been experienced in arriving to this point. By the time my three years were over, my living and working situation in China did not overwhelm me anymore. I enjoyed the frenzied chaos, the edginess and constant change that made the city uniquely Beijing. In a way, I felt I had reached equilibrium with my environment.

Canada is still home, but now so is a little part of China.

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