

# How Positionality of Students Influences the Learning by the “Junior Year Abroad Program” at Tamkang University, Taiwan

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***Abstract:*** *The purpose of this is to better understand and deeper explore how the positionalities of students of Tamkang University shape their intercultural learning experiences in their Junior Abroad year. Three conclusions found in the study: Political identity as an important element, being ignored and powerless in the classroom and Personal Growth gained through the JYAP.*

## Introduction

Among the local national and private universities, Tamkang University (TKU) was the first institution of higher education to inaugurate the Junior Year Abroad Program (JYAP) in Taiwan, the Republic of China. In fact, TKU has for many years been committed to promoting internationalization. In July of 1992, when the Ministry of Education (MOE) promulgated the regulations regarding undergraduates studying abroad TKU has been actively internationalizing itself and putting emphasis on information and future-oriented education in the past decades. Because of Tamkang's ceaseless efforts, in 1994 the MOE finally approved Tamkang's petition to permit male undergraduates to spend their junior year studying abroad as well. Under this program, the credits they earn at the host universities can be transferred to their home university, thereby paving the way for local undergraduates to study for one-year at overseas universities during their four years of college education, marking a new milestone in the history of the higher education of Taiwan. In 1995, the Academic Exchange Committee changed its designation to International Exchange Committee (IEC) has established academic cooperation with over 104 universities in the five continents, 28 countries with the aim of training students to acquire a global outlook and to better understand and appreciate other cultures. This year, a total of 453 students from TKU are studying abroad at our sister universities under the JYAP (2009-2010 Tamkang University Catalog).

Not only Tamkang University sees an urgent need to educate youth in Taiwan about global concerns and responsibilities, there have been other universities joined to provide a year abroad programs in the recent years. The rationales behind these programs are the beliefs that international travel has long been viewed as one method of introducing such global perspectives into the lives of young people. Many claims have been made about the effects of foreign travel on personality, including increased independence and tolerance, and a greater openness or receptivity to other people in the world. Unfortunately, the benefits attributed to participation in international exchange have largely been explained and defended by anecdotal evidence rather than empirical study.

The purpose of this is to better understand and deeper explore how the positionalities of students of Tamkang University shape their intercultural learning experiences in their Junior Abroad year. In this study, the positionality refers to the place one occupies in the societal hierarchy and is usually defined by the major categories of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and or disability. The positionality of the teachers and learners, in particular the racial category of whiteness, emerged as a key power relationship mediating classroom dynamics. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero suggest that the facilitation model of teaching and learning does not account

well for these dynamics and that further efforts are needed to better understand how societal power relations affect teaching and learning efforts and what responses adult educators can make to negotiate these issues. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to explore how the positionality of students shapes their intercultural learning experiences in their Junior Abroad year. In this study, the positionality refers to the place one occupies in the societal hierarchy and is usually defined by the major categories of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and or disability.

### **Literature Review**

By the time passing, globalization has stridden forward the field of higher education. There are more and more universities provide a great quantity undergraduate students going out to earn credits from overseas universities. Furthermore, from the perspective of Ellingboe (1997), she considered internationalization in education field as a process to merge international thoughts into a college or university system. She said, “it is an ongoing, future-oriented, interdisciplinary, leadership-driven vision that involves top administrators creating an institutional vision and motivating people in both academic affairs and student affairs units to change an entire system to think globally, comparatively, and collaboratively while reacting to multi-dimensional environmental changes in global political, economic, social, and cultural arenas (Ellingboe, 1996a).” And she also mentioned the practical methods for campuses and professors.

For campuses, there are some components about an internationalized environment. For example, they have to provide world languages and area studies courses for students learning. Moreover, they should not only increase international diversity in campus but also provide international teaching, research, and consulting opportunities for faculty (including travel grants and fellowships) among students, faculty, and scholars. Besides, they need to establish partnerships and networks with universities across the globe and give international study, work, research programs and internship service opportunities for students (including scholarships). From the research of Dhanasobhon, Hill and Lakey made a survey for 250 completed questionnaires from Thai students who will be back to their hometown from United States. And they found out that the participation of students was not strongly affected by interpersonal and mass communication channel. On the contrary, it just occupied 6% of the total variation in the student complexity. On the other hand, fluently speaking ability, acculturation motivation, and interaction potential were seen as important factors in the research. Besides, English fluency, interaction potential and media availability didn't influence one's perceptual complexity straightly. However, it was found that the acculturation movement can decide the level of people's perceptions of the host society. This article serves the purpose of the understanding of how communication patterns impacts students while they are overseas. Thus, it helps the research to take a look at how TKU JYAP students navigate their life and how this facet plays a role in their learning.

In Lyakhovetska's research, he interviewed different international students from various countries. And the finding showed that classroom participation presented challenges for students from non-English speaking countries since they were uncertain of their English skills, lacked background in Canadian issues, and not used to participating in spontaneous classroom debates. Moreover, they found it was hard to participate in the courses focused on provincial matters. They also needed explanation of specific terminology and cultural phenomena but they did enjoy participation in international issues from the courses. Besides, only few interviewees took part in

social events and extra-curricular academic activities and they also lacked connection with Canadian students and faculty. On the other hand, from the finding, although international students may contribute to development of world friendships by making friends with each other, Canadian students are not necessarily part of these friendships. However, those international students from English-speaking countries were largely successful in making friends or associating themselves with other international students. How TKU's students interact with local students then?

Li and Gasser (2005) use 117 students from 17 Asian countries and regions completed questionnaires about their socio-cultural adjustment, contact with the hosts, ethnic identity, and cross-cultural self-efficacy. The results of the present study have some practical implications for educational practices. The study made two contributions to the cross-cultural adjustment literature. First, this study examined Asian international students' socio-cultural adjustment. The findings from this study indicated that contacting with the hosts and cross-cultural self-efficacy were both related to Asian students' successful socio-cultural adjustment. Secondly, by integrating a number of theoretical perspectives, the current study formulated and examined two mediations in the Asian student example. The Asian students' cross cultural self-efficacy was found to be significantly related to their contact with the hosts and socio-cultural adjustment. In conclusion, Asian international students' adjustment is a dynamic process that is influenced by a host of factors. So what is the situation with TKU students when they are JYAP?

### **Research Methodology**

This is a qualitative research focusing on the experiential perspectives of the TKU-Lanyang senior students who came back from JYAP in 2008. Four focus groups were conducted to gather the homogeneous experiences from students during January, 2009. Through their reflective analysis of their experiences, this research examines the issues of power in traditional Euro-American classroom environments and how these classrooms were being transformed with the influences of diverse cultures; specifically considering aspects of class, gender, race and religion.

### **Findings**

#### *Political Identity as an Important Element*

How did the personal identity influence TKU's students' learning while they were studying overseas? One clear theme kept coming up in these focus was that Taiwanese students were being considered Chinese during the year abroad and students hate to be seen as Chinese. A student who studied in Sacramento, CA, USA said,

Taiwan has long been ignored by Americans. Taiwan is only a small dot on the map so Americans see us as a part of them. I strongly felt being discriminated. There is a difference between Taiwan and China in terms of our thoughts and values. I feel uncomfortable about this issue...The problem of national identity was never occurred until I went to study in the states... You know, it is really about the sense of security (Y.L., 27)

Some other students also complaint about people wrong heard Taiwan as Thailand which frustrated them. However, some students take this political issue at ease since they cannot really define what authentic "Taiwanese" culture is when they were asked to take a part in "International Festival" in Winona State University. This powerless situation can also be applied

to their classroom learning when an American professor claimed that Taiwan indeed is a part of China. Other student who studied in Vienna, Austria, shared a story about a custom officer never sees a Taiwanese passport at the local airport. In sum, Taiwanese students were forced to encounter the political identity only after they learned together with Americans.

### *Being Ignored and Powerless in the Classroom*

In the discussion of how they were treated in the classroom. Without questioning, students faced a lot of difficulties with their limited English. How they were treated depended upon the cultural literacy both of the instructors and the classmates. H.Y. who studied in Winona described that there was not enough time to respond what she thought in the group discussion especially when the group members were decided by the instructors. The other example was given by the student who studied in Sacramento. Y.L. recalled how his three white American teammates left all the work to him as if it was a conspiracy of these three White Americans. S.R. who studied in Washington State University showed the same concern that her opinion was silenced since she did not have a chance to choose the topic or the format of the presentation of her team.

### *Personal Growth Gained through the JYAP*

In general, students owned positive attitude for the JYAP at Tamkang. There are three aspects in their personal growth. First of all, they take an active role in asking and answering questions in the Taiwanese classroom. S.R. also mentioned that most of the time American students were talking nonsense in the class. This culture of American somehow helped her in expressing more after came back to Taiwanese classroom. Matter of fact, students was either shy or intimidated by the authority of teachers to raise or respond to questions in the classroom before they studied abroad. L.S. who studied in Indiana University-Pennsylvania pointed out that she would never argue with the instructor before she went to study abroad. However, she is able to speak up what she thinks in the classroom although she still dares not to challenge the instructor who controls the grades.

## **Conclusion**

In Annie (Ya-Ping) Lee, Lienti Bei, & Sharon A DeVaney did a phenomenological study on the acculturation experience of Taiwanese students who attended universities in the United States as exchange students. They found out that Taiwanese students who immersed in the Confucian tradition had learning difficulties while they were in the classrooms where Socratic instructional style prevailed in the United. Teaching methods such as role play, team project, and case studies were challenging but participants said they became involved and performed well. Overall, the participants in their study felt that they maintained their cultural identity but gained tremendously from exposure to new concepts, skills, and interactions with American professors and students. Similar to this study, many experts propose that many international exchange students come across barriers in learning at their host universities (Berry & Sam, 1997; Biggs, 1996; Prue, 2004). The reason for the difficulty is that education in the U.S. is characterized as Socratic with an emphasis on evaluating questions and solving problems (Greenholz, 2003; Pratt, 1992). In contrast, education in Chinese society is based on Confucian traditions that search for knowledge via memorization, rote learning, and repetition (Hammond & Gao, 2002). Table 1 shows important differences between Socratic and Confucian learning (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

**SOCRATIC LEARNING(WESTERN-  
INFLUENCED)**

**CONFUCIAN LEARNING (CHINESE-  
INFLUENCED)**

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Encourage questions about instructors' presentations	Avoid questioning based on instructors' presentations
Private questioning	Accept or postpone questioning
Express personal hypotheses	Absorb and embrace concepts taught by instructors
Desire for self-direction	Structured tasks to learn Focus on practical outcomes
Learning for its own sake	

Table1. Socratic Learning versus Confucian Learning

In spite of the researches above were done for exchange students, Taiwanese students also might face the same problems such as “how did exchange students feel about the relationship between themselves and the students from the U.S.?” and “did they become friends outside of class?” in the year of Junior Abroad. Takacs (2003) also suggests that “how does who you are and where you stand in relation to others shape what you know about the world? To work toward a just world--a world where all have equal access to opportunity--means, as a start, opening up heart and mind to the perspectives of others.” In the process of globalization and internationalization, Taiwanese student must be able to hear each other and to respect and learn from what they hear while their learning in Junior Year Abroad. Taiwanese students must understand how they are positioned in relation to others—as dominant/subordinate, marginal/center, empowered/powerless.

In *The Feminist Classroom*, Maher and Tetreault (2001: 164) describe "the idea of positionality, in which people are defined not in terms of fixed identities, but by their location within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analyzed and changed." For those who teach for social justice, the "and changed" part is crucial: understanding positionality means understanding where you stand with respect to power, an essential skill for social change agents. From this understanding, Taiwanese students have a standpoint from which to challenge power and change themselves. Few things are more difficult than to see outside the bounds of one's own perspective--to be able to identify assumptions that one takes as universal truths, but that instead have been crafted by one's own unique identity and experiences in the world. Takacs also states that we live much of our lives in our own heads, in a reconfirming dialogue with ourselves. Even when we discuss crucial issues with others, much of the dialogue is not dialogue: it is monologue where we work to convince others to understand us or to adopt our view. Simply acknowledging that one's knowledge claims are not universal truths--that one's positionality can bias one's epistemology--is itself a leap for many people, one that can help to make us more open to the world's possibilities.

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