Socialization and Learning of Foreign Adult Learners: Challenges and Needs

Tereza Cristina C. Valverde
Texas State University

Abstract: Adult foreign learners in higher education face challenges to integrate into the academic community. Strategies such as engaging in mentorship, sharing cultural traits, participating in service-learning programs and in the Academic and Learning Assistance centers can improve socialization and learning of foreign learners.

The need for intercultural programs in universities and colleges is growing due to the increased number of adult learners returning to academic settings (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Chao & Good, 2004). This includes a greater number of foreign students in all fields of higher education (Chin, 2005). Consequently, cross-cultural interactions have become an important issue in the workplace and educational institutions. Adult educators, concerned with meeting the educational needs of foreign adults, have begun to address these issues (Brooks, 2009a; Brooks, 2009b; Coryell, 2013; Larrotta, 2009; Lee & Sheared, 2002; Morrice, 2012). Thus, it is both timely and important to inquire what are the challenges and needs of foreign adult learners in higher education? How can socialization and cross-cultural learning of foreign adult learners in higher education be improved?

Challenges and Needs of Foreign Adult Learners

This essay is based on the premise that foreign adult learners, being in a new environment, face socialization and learning issues whose outcome will be influenced by their academic community. Meaningful and supportive cross-cultural interactions within their academic community contribute positively to their educational achievements. Non-constructive cross-cultural exchanges contribute to isolation and a feeling of not belonging that negatively impacts a student's socialization and academic success. Foreign students who come with cultural and linguistic differences face even greater challenges in terms of socialization and learning, for instance, when interacting and communicating (spoken and written), mostly with professors and peers who are in direct contact with them. Thus, it is essential not only for adult educators, but for the academic community to understand how language and culture shape the lives of foreign students, including their relationships and understanding of the world, so as to offer them a more inclusive environment.

Cross-Cultural Teaching/Learning Strategies

A recent study from Coryell (2013) posits that adult educators should expand their global education and include international cross-cultural perspectives when planning their programs so as to attend the needs of foreign learners. Merriam and Kim (2008) suggest the implementation of methodologies that address non-Western cultures to provide a way to promote global education perspectives of students. Lee and Sheared (2002) propose that adult educators should design inclusive curriculum for adult immigrants, giving them a chance to participate in the design and to make the classroom a community that involves the learners.

Based on the insights the literature offer and on my own experience as an immigrant adult learner in a doctoral program, I propose some strategies to help foreigner students to overcome challenges of socialization, such as giving students opportunities to share their culture and language peculiarities - to sensitize the academic community to cultural differences; to

engage them in mentorship programs with faculty and/or students – being aware of peculiarities involving cross-cultural mentorship (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002; Merriam, 1983); to encourage their participation in service learning programs – to construct their knowledge about the new culture in situated learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2010); and to offer assistance through Academic and Learning Assistance centers. These strategies promote cross-cultural interactions that can help foreign students to socialize and to develop a sense of belonging within the academic community.

Finally, educators should consider that even a foreign students' conception of community may differ from ours due to their cultural background. In order to better address the needs of foreign students we recommend further studies that address the following questions. How do foreign adult learners from different cultures perceive community? How does one measure or assess successful integration to the academic community? How is foreign student achievement affected by their socialization or the lack of it?

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