AMERICAN TEACHER TRAINEES IN MALAYSIA: PREPARING BOTH SIDES FOR SUCCESS

Gina Zanolini Morrison
Teacher Education Program
School of Education
Wilkes University
Wilkes-Barre, PA USA 18766
gina.morrison@wilkes.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an international partnership between an American private university and a Malaysian international school, focusing on the arrangements that were made on both sides to ensure a successful cross-cultural learning experience for all involved.

For two consecutive years, American student teacher trainees have travelled to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to gain experience teaching the diverse learners of an international school. There were many challenges to be met in order to prepare both sides for this cross-cultural exchange. The steps taken in this global connection process will be explained in this paper, as well as the manner in which unforeseen problems were navigated. In addition, the preliminary results of an ongoing qualitative study with the teacher trainees, in which they were asked to assess the effect that the study abroad experience has had on their lives, will be shared.

Field of Research: Study abroad, teacher trainees, cross-cultural education, global education

"The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one's own country as a foreign land." - Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936)

1. Introduction

In a roundtable with students in Istanbul, U.S. President Barack Obama said, “Simple exchanges can break down walls between us, for when people come together and speak to one another and share a common experience, then their common humanity is revealed.... And that's where progress begins" (Obama, 2009). Efforts have been on the rise to promote student involvement in study abroad In the United States, in general.

Young Americans who take the jump into study abroad are better prepared for the challenges of the twenty-first century, according to the National Association of International Educators. “International exchanges have often been cited as one of our strongest and most effective public diplomacy tools. International experiences not only enhance understanding and cross-cultural sensitivity, but also give one a new perspective on one's own country” (NAFSA, 2012). Furthermore, self-awareness and
cultural identity development are enhanced by an environment of contrast (Bouette, 1998; Contreras, 1997; Helms, 1990; Morrison, 2010; Tatum, 1992), such as that found in a study abroad experience.

Indeed, research has revealed the positive effects of study abroad on students. A ten year study of universities across the state of Georgia, USA, begun in the year 2000, found that students who participated in study abroad programs have higher academic performance, higher graduation rates, and improved cross-cultural knowledge (Redden, 2010). Teacher education institutions are developing study abroad programs with these expectations, as well. Specifically, study abroad field experiences for teacher trainees seek to address two specific goals: 1) preparing teachers—particularly White, middle class, female students—for the diverse populations of their future classrooms, and 2) developing global perspectives in these future educators (Phillion, Malewski, Sharma & Wang, 2009). These goals are congruent with the goals of the Student Teaching in Malaysia Project, which developed from relationships among educators in two countries: Malaysia and the United States.

In 2011, an international partnership between an American private university and a Malaysian international school was brought about by an equal dose of good luck and good will. During the author’s one-year sabbatical in Malaysia, she negotiated with the owners of an international school in Kuala Lumpur for a reduction in her 12 year-old daughter’s tuition fees, in exchange for her providing professional development sessions for the school’s faculty on weekends. This arrangement not only proved to be a positive experience at the time, but also provided the foundation for an ongoing cultural exchange for the professor and her teacher trainees. The owners of the school, pleased with the training, invited the author to return to the school, bringing her teacher trainees to conduct half of their required student teaching experience on site in the Kuala Lumpur primary and secondary school.

A very generous school administration offered these teacher trainees free lodging, meals and airfare while being afforded the opportunity to gain valuable work experience in a diverse educational environment. To be mentored on-site by Malaysian cooperating teachers and the author, who would serve as the chaperone and student teaching supervisor, six students were invited each year for three consecutive years to Kuala Lumpur, to hone their teaching skills in an exciting, international, English-speaking venue.

During 2012, three elementary and three secondary teacher trainees were placed at Sri Utama International School for seven weeks. While abroad, they not only taught classes in a variety of subjects, but also availed themselves of the local sites and enjoyed the multiculturalism of Malaysia. They visited beautiful Terengganu, historic Malacca, and exciting Singapore, where they presented at an international conference supported by university funds. They visited the elephant sanctuary and the rainforest jungle, celebrated Chinese New Year, and experienced the Hindu festival of Thaipusam at breathtaking Batu Caves.

As a result of this life-changing seven-week study abroad experience in Malaysia, two of the six future teachers accepted full-time teaching positions at the school and returned to Kuala Lumpur after graduation to begin their teaching careers. These young
professionals have been instrumental in maintaining a positive linkage between the two institutions and, in fact, returned to the university during the 2012 school holidays to conduct a pre-travel orientation session for the second cohort scheduled to arrive in January 2013.

There were many challenges to be met and arrangements to be made on both sides to ensure a successful cross-cultural learning experience for all involved. The steps taken in this global connection process involved preparations on two levels: the institutions and the students.

2. Institutional Level Preparations

Wilkes University has been cultivating the culture of study abroad for years, in accordance with the mission of the university and the creation of the Center for Global Education and Diversity (Fonjweng & Morrison, 2010). This center houses the university’s study abroad program, which has assisted efforts to get university students overseas. The study abroad coordinator has played a pivotal role in moving this Student Teaching in Malaysia Project ahead, as has the chair of the Education Department, the dean of the School of Education, and of course the owner and administrators of the Malaysian international school, Sri Utama.

- **Accreditation.** After the idea was discussed informally, it was necessary to secure permission from the U. S. Department of Education. Permission was granted provided the pre-service teachers complete the second half of their student teaching experience in Pennsylvania, the state granting them teacher certification.

- **MOU.** The creation of the Memorandum of Understanding was an extremely important step in solidifying the relationship between the two institutions. Negotiating terms that will prove to be sustainable requires give and take on both parties, and luckily the generosity and good will of the international school made the process move along smoothly. Nevertheless, all levels of administration at both institutions needed to weigh in on the terms, with the approval of each institution’s legal department. Thankfully, the university’s study abroad office director had written several MOUs before and was instrumental in crafting this one.

- **Financial arrangements.** All expenses were negotiated and itemized in the MOU.

- **Transportation arrangements.** All details related to the airfare and travel to and from the airport were specified in the MOU.

- **Duties and responsibilities.** The responsibilities of each person involved in the arrangement were clarified in the MOU. Expectations of the teacher trainees and the cooperating teachers (mentors) were outlined in the university manuals, but the supervisor also assumed additional responsibilities for professional development of faculty. In fact, the author created a complete new teacher training program that was begun during the first cohort’s visit in 2012 and that continues to this day. The number of training sessions agreed upon was specified in the MOU.

- **Special arrangements.** In this agreement between the American university and the Malaysian international school, there was a special arrangement made for a visitor from the international school to come to the university for one month as
part of an educational exchange. Housing and meals were to be covered by the university.

3. Student Level Preparations

The following is a list of preparations that were made on the student level to assist the success of the project on the American side:

- **Announcement.** A general announcement of the Student Teaching Abroad in Malaysia Project was made to the faculty of the Education Department, as well as to the Teacher Education Committee consisting of representatives of the various departments that certify student teachers. At that time, faculty discussed concerns and offered recommendations on how to proceed in the selection process.

- **Application.** Development of the application involved several people over several months. In the end, simplicity in style was chosen as the best option. Aside from listing personal contact information and references, the applicants were asked to provide a statement of why they should be considered for this opportunity. They were informed that their applications would be made available to the selection committees in both countries.

- **Information session.** A general announcement was made during the student teacher information session held each semester for all students eligible for student teaching one semester before graduation. At that meeting, the semester before the study abroad, time was allotted for the author to discuss her experience while on sabbatical in Malaysia and to describe the Student Teaching in Malaysia Project. This session was especially designed to promote travel to Malaysia, with several images of the natural beauty, the modern architecture, and the great diversity of the people included in the presentation. Questions were answered and the applications were made available to each prospective student teacher, and the selection process was officially begun.

- **Selection process.** Students were given approximately one month to submit the application online. The applications were reviewed by a three-person selection committee consisting of the chair of the department, the study abroad director, and the university professor who would be supervising the teacher trainees while abroad (the author). All applicants were also vetted through the highly confidential meetings of the faculty of the Education Department and the Teacher Education Committee. The owner and administrators of the international school reviewed all applications online and discussed each applicant over the phone, but they ultimately deferred to the university in the selection of the six candidates. Their only request was to select three primary and three secondary teachers for the placement.

- **Interview.** Due to the late date of the MOU signing that first year, there was no time to schedule interviews for the first cohort of student applicants. This omission was corrected for the second cohort. The interview was a very valuable part of the selection process in that it allowed the interviewers to assess the more subtle issues of personal interactions through informal conversations, and to get a “feel” for how the interviewer might cope with peers and with the host culture.
Questions such as, “What would you be worried about if selected?” and “What are the foods that you don’t eat?” revealed useful answers.

- **Notification.** All applicants were notified by email of the selection three months before the tentative travel date. The author made herself available to discuss any questions or concerns the applicants had.

- **Training.** Pre-travel orientation sessions consisted of four sessions, ninety minutes each, for a total of 6 hours. The topics included travel information, such as how to get a passport, what to pack, and Malaysian culture. The author's husband, a native of Malaysia who accompanied her on the trip, discussed Malaysian cultural information with the teacher trainees. The study abroad director reviewed health insurance requirements and emergency procedures. In addition, the websites of the U. S. Department of State and the international school were explored, and students were asked to sign up with the U. S. Embassy for travel advisories.

- **Administrative tasks.** University staff prepared extra books and manuals for the trip. Travel arrangements to and from the airport were arranged, and photocopies of all travellers’ passports were collected.

On the Malaysian side, various measures had to be taken to ensure the success of the project.

- **Transportation.** The generosity of the school’s owner provided the means for all airfare. The tickets were booked in Malaysia after receipt of all passport information. In addition, the school arranged for airport pick-up.

- **Housing.** The teacher trainees were housed in the on-campus hostel; thus, their rooms were re-decorated and prepared. The supervisor and her husband were housed at a long-term apartment a short distance from the school. Teacher trainees were given the special freedom to come and go after work hours, with the understanding that the behaviour should be respectful at all times both inside and outside school grounds. All housing costs were assumed by the school.

- **Meals.** The meal plan available to the boarding students was expanded to include the teacher trainees. Although it was evident that special efforts were made to accommodate American tastes, the menu remained mostly Malaysian and was very satisfying to most of the teacher trainees. All meal costs were defrayed by the school.

- **Laundry service.** Additional laundry services were made available to the teacher trainees who opted for them at their own expense.

- **Mentors.** Cooperating teachers were assigned to mentor each teacher trainee. Happily, all of these mentors developed strong bonds with the student teachers assigned to them.

### 4. Student Teaching Abroad in Malaysia: A Qualitative Study of the Experience

Finally, during the spring semester of 2012, the first cohort of six student teachers from the Teacher Education Program at Wilkes University travelled to Malaysia to complete a seven-week teaching placement at Sri Utama International Schools in Kuala Lumpur. Three elementary and three secondary teaching certificate candidates were carefully
selected from among 14 interested applicants, out of 39 student teachers completing their placements that semester.

A three-year agreement between Sri Utama Schools and Wilkes University had been arranged through a joint effort of the School of Education and the Center for Global Education of Wilkes University. In order to learn from this first Teacher Education study abroad cohort, and in order to enhance their experience, a proposal was submitted to conduct a formal study in which the student teachers were to complete reflective questions about their study abroad experience. The proposal for this qualitative study was approved and research on the Student Teaching in Malaysia Project was begun in January 2012.

5. Theoretical Framework

The study was based on the research conducted by Price and Savicki (2012), who authorized the use of their research questions for this study. The goals of this study were to capture the experience of the students before, during, and after their student teaching experience in Malaysia through reflective journal writings. In this manner, the researchers hoped to assess the goals of the teacher trainees and their perception of how much of their goals were attained, in addition to the acquisition of cross-cultural knowledge and improvement in diversity skill. Furthermore, the researchers plan to utilize the results to assist their efforts to build highly successful study abroad programs.

A qualitative approach to data collection was appropriate for this study in that it allowed for reflective, open-ended responses according to each participant's unique internal and external experiences before, during, and after the study abroad experience. Reflexivity is, after all, at the center of the qualitative research design and process (Luttrell, 2010, p. 160).

Maxwell (2005) proposed a model of qualitative research that conceptualizes the interactions tying together the many elements of a qualitative study and that makes visible “the central role that research relationships play. Negotiating and representing research relationships—what and how we learn with and about others and ourselves—is at the heart of the research journey” (Luttrell, 2010, p. 160). These interactions are flexible, changeable, and ever-shifting. Maxwell's model guided the research design of the study. The elements of the Student Teaching in Malaysia study are represented in Figure 1.1, as structured by Maxwell (2005).
6. Methodology

6.1 Sample

Participants in this study were full-time students enrolled in the undergraduate Teacher Education Program of study at a small, private, liberal arts university in northeaster United States. Each of these future teachers had been selected to complete seven weeks of their student teaching requirement in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, during the spring semester of 2012 and 2013, six students each year. All 12 students invited to join the study did participate, and the invitation to participate in this ongoing study will be extended to the 2014 cohort when they are selected. At the onset of the study, all participants were between 21 and 23 years of age, in their senior year at the university, and involved in fulfilling their final requirement for teacher certification—their student teaching placement. There were 5 women the first year and 4 women the second year, for a total of 9 female participants, all White Americans. There were a total of 3 male participants: one man the first year and two men the second year—two White and one African American. Their teaching certification areas were as follows:
6.2 Data collection

In January of 2012 and 2013, each of the six undergraduate teacher trainees selected to complete student teaching in Malaysia were invited to participate in the study. Each year, all were eager to join the study. At some point during their pre-travel orientation sessions, they were given consent forms and an opportunity to ask any questions they might have had. Since cultural orientation sessions had already begun, they were familiar with some of the facts about travelling abroad, living in Malaysia, and student teaching at the international school there. However, with the purpose of the study being to uncover the students’ perceptions of the experience and the changes it has caused within each participant, rather than an accumulation of facts, their involvement in pre-travel cultural information sessions at the onset of the data collection was not seen as a threat to the validity of the study.

6.2 Data collection instrument

A set of questions specifically designed for examination of study abroad experiences was utilized as the data collection instrument (Price & Savicki, 2012). The following
assessments items are adapted from the *Reflection Provoking Questions Assignment* of the Office of Study Abroad and International Exchanges at Western Oregon University. These journal questions, to which the teacher trainees responded in electronic and hard copy format, were used to collect the data in this study:

A: Prior to departure

1. How and why did you choose to apply for this student teaching abroad experience? Who or what was most influential on your decision to do so?
2. What expectations and what pre-conceived notions do you have of your host culture, Malaysia? How do you see yourself interacting with the host culture in light of your expectations and pre-conceived notions?
3. What are your expectations and what are your pre-conceived notions about student teaching in Malaysia? What do you hope to learn, and how do you envision the learning environments?
4. How do you feel about leaving home and campus? What are you glad to be leaving behind? What do you think you’ll miss?
5. What ideologies are you taking with you? Identifying these beliefs and their source may help you when you are challenged abroad by those with a different point of view.

B: While Abroad

1. What has the separation from friends, family, school, and a familiar way of life revealed to you about yourself?
2. Describe the scene that greeted you upon arrival in the airport and recount the behavior you observed. What bewildered, delighted, interested, amused, or frightened you? Why?
3. Describe how your expectations and pre-conceived notions of the host culture are being met or not. How have your first impressions of the country and its people changed since your arrival?
4. Systems of education and forms of teaching vary from country to country. What have you discovered about the system of education in your host nation compared to the system of education you experience in the U.S.? Are your pre-conceived notions hindering your progress or aiding you in navigating new academic rules?
5. Have your relationships with individuals or your understanding of the culture become more complicated as your stay lengthens? How long do you think it takes to begin to understand and be part of the complexities of your host culture?

C: After Returning

1. Were the expectations you had of your host culture met? Why or why not? Was the vision of yourself in interaction with the host culture realized? Why or why not? What about your pre-conceived notions? Which have you changed and which beliefs or attitudes have you retained?
2. Were the expectations you had of your academic program abroad met? Why or why not? What about your preconceived notions? Which have you changed and which beliefs or attitudes have you retained?
3. How do you feel about being home and back on campus? Are you glad to be home? What do you miss the most about your host country?
4. What hard skills did you learn or built upon while abroad? How can these be
reflected on your resume? How will these skills support your desired employment? How will you articulate these skills during an interview with a prospective employer?

5. What soft skills did you learn or built upon while abroad? How can these be reflected on your resume? How will these skills support your desired employment? How will you articulate these strengths during an interview with a perspective employer?

Methodology

The selected teacher trainees were invited to share their experiences by joining the study and keeping an electronic journal of responses, to be submitted to the investigators. The principal investigator (the author) accompanied the students and supervised them during their student teaching, thus facilitating ongoing data collection, analysis and verification. These documents were then shared with the co-investigator, who assisted with a qualitative analysis of coding the responses for themes. A third-party external auditor not acquainted with the students was asked to assist with the final data analysis. This measure, in addition to a focus group with the students after the preliminary analysis has been completed, will be undertaken for the purpose of verifying findings.

The findings will be used to guide future study abroad initiatives at the university, and, when shared, may also prove beneficial to other universities who wish to strengthen their study abroad programs.

7. Findings & Discussion

While data analysis is ongoing, some preliminary findings have emerged from the first cohort that are of interest. The initial analysis of the 2012 student responses yielded five common themes: intercultural adjustment, general self-esteem, social self-esteem, flexibility, and satisfaction with life.

1. Intercultural adjustment. While these students had been prepared for some aspects of Malaysian culture during the pre-travel orientation, there were many aspects of the culture that required personal adjustment. The most often discussed cultural characteristic was the “laid-back” nature of the Malaysian people. While the students truly enjoyed this softer, kinder, warmer interpersonal style of interaction, they found that they had to learn to adjust to the way things are done in Malaysia because of this cultural style. Many commented on the indirectness of problem solving, which is extremely different from the direct and often confrontational style of problem solving common to Americans. One student wrote, “Malaysia doesn't like to have conflict so that means skating around the truth or beating around the bush until you stop asking…. I am not a fan of this…. But Malaysia seems to be doing ok with what they are doing.” Another aspect of intercultural adjustment came in the form of recognizing that the students in their classes, who were mostly Asian, did not at
all adhere to the “model minority” myth that exists in the United States. Instead of being passive and quiet, as expected, these Asian students were remarkable similar to the students in American classrooms, according to the teacher trainees—active, engaged, and challenging. One student wrote, “Those stereotypes were blown out of the water.”

2. **General self-esteem.** These teacher trainees expressed pride in the professional growth that they experienced while abroad. When coping with the challenges of teaching, such as the lack of internet access in the classrooms, they discovered strengths, such as creativity and patience. Almost all students discussed the perception that the amount of patience they needed in performing their teaching duties was above anything they had experienced before, and they felt happy about their ability to meet that demand. They felt they grew much stronger in their teaching skills and expressed much more confidence at the end of the study. One student wrote, “I flourished as a teacher.”

3. **Social self-esteem.** These teacher trainees were far away from family and friends, comfortable routines, and familiar sights and sounds. As White Americans and as Christians, they were suddenly minorities in a strange culture. In dealing with the challenges of being abroad, they seemed very pleased that they were able to discover their own adaptability, strength, and resilience. One student wrote, “This trip has made me realize that I am capable of being on my own.” Most of all, they were very happy with the relationships that they were able to form with diverse colleagues and students. They felt their cultural broadening was a great social asset.

4. **Flexibility.** Most respondents wrote with a sense of pride about their ability to cope with the stresses of challenges they met while abroad. They felt that they had learned to navigate the broad differences between the American educational system in which they had been trained and the educational system in the Malaysian school, particularly the following issues: lack of consistent technology in the classrooms, discomfort with the exam-based grading system of the school, absence of a school-wide classroom management plan, and what they described felt to them as a “lack of structure” in the daily operations of the school. This was offset by their ability to connect to the people there and to find those relationships very stabilizing.

5. **Satisfaction with life.** Almost all students reported a softer and warmer view of their personal relationships back home, in keeping with the adage “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” They wrote about their international students, their host (the school owner), and their fellow Malaysian teachers with great affection, and even love. They felt that the treatment they received was “above and beyond hospitality,” as one student explained. They were extremely satisfied with having had this opportunity, some expressing that it had changed their lives forever. “I like it here in Malaysia,” one student wrote. “I could picture myself living here and being happy.” Two students, in fact, did make the choice to return and work in Malaysia.
These preliminary findings will be further analyzed, coded, and compared to the findings of the originators of the methodology (Price & Savicki, 2012). In addition, the responses of the second cohort, as well as the third scheduled to travel to Malaysia in 2014, will be included in future analyses.

8. Conclusions and Future Recommendations

The Student Teaching in Malaysia Project has provided American teacher trainees with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for personal and professional growth in a diverse and hospitable environment. Many preparations on both sides of the world were needed to ensure the success of this project, and research is ongoing as to the changes it has created in its participants. Initial results, however, prove hopeful that a long-lasting and productive bridge has been built between one small American university and one international school in Malaysia, thanks to strong and positive relationships of the people involved.

Americans share many things in common, whatever their race, gender or ethnicity in the United States: language, consumer culture, celebrity culture, and the individualism that permeates all aspects of American culture, including American religions (Appiah, 2005, p. 116). A chance to step outside of these familiarities and explore deep differences among people can only be accomplished by travelling to another country, not as a tourist, but as a long-term visitor with work to be done. With that experience comes the hope that travellers will discover the deep commonalities among us, no matter what the differences—a promise that was fulfilled with the young American men and women who were given the chance to student teach in Malaysia.

Acknowledgements

The Student Teaching in Malaysia Project is made possible through the generosity of Sri Utama International School in donating travel expenses, accommodations, and meals for the students and the university supervisor. This qualitative study research project and the presentation of this paper are supported by grants from Wilkes University.

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