



Auto-Bio/Ethnography as a Curriculum in Cross-Culture Communication: A Voice from the Other Shore

AUTO-BIO/ETHNOGRAPHY COMME UN CURRICULUM DE LA CROIX-COMMUNICATION CULTURE: UNE VOIX DE L'AUTRE RIVE

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Received 1 October 2011; accepted 21 November 2011

Abstract

In an increasingly globalized and multicultural world, authentic auto-bio/ethnographic travel accounts have become representations of the social, cultural, historical, and political intricacies in cross-culture communication. In this research study, I critically analyze three excerpts from my diary narrated in the form of short stories in order to answer two research questions: How do cultures shape our personalities? And, what factors influence cross-culture communication of the "Self" and the "Other?" I selected the Thematic Analysis method in Narrative Analysis to analyze my three narratives. The narrative analysis resulted in three themes: cultural identities, appearance and reality, and bridging the gaps. I argue that being an Arab, Muslim, female with *hijab* (hair scarf) in the U.S. after 9/11 creates a complex experience in cross-culture communication. I conclude that international students' auto-bio/ethnography travel accounts can be implemented as a curriculum to celebrate our similarities and respect and appreciate our differences.

Key words: Auto-bio/ethnography; Curriculum; Self actualization; Cultural agent; Hijab

Résumé

Dans un monde de plus en plus globalisé et multiculturel, authentiques récits de voyage auto-bio/ethnographique sont devenus des représentations de la complexité sociale, culturelle, historique et politique dans la culture croisée de la communication. Dans cette étude, je l'analyse critique de trois extraits de mon journal intime raconté sous la forme d'histoires courtes, afin de répondre à deux

questions de recherche: Comment les cultures façonnent nos personnalités et, quels facteurs influencent croix-culture de communication de la «soi» et les "autres" Je choisis la méthode d'analyse thématique de l'analyse narrative? pour analyser mes narrations les trois analyse narrative conduit à trois thèmes: identités culturelles, l'apparence et la réalité, et combler les lacunes je soutiens que être arabe, musulman, femelle avec le hijab (foulard cheveux) aux Etats-Unis après 9 / 11 crée une expérience complexe lors du contre-culture de communication. je conclus que les comptes des étudiants internationaux de voyage auto-bio/ethnography peut être mis en œuvre un programme pour célébrer nos ressemblances et les respecter et apprécier nos différences.

Mots-clés: Auto-bio/Ethnography; Le curriculum; L'actualisation de soi; Agent culturel; Le hijab

Methal R. Mohammed-Marzouk (2011). Auto-Bio/Ethnography as a Curriculum in Cross-Culture Communication: A Voice from the Other Shore. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 7(4), 133-139. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020110704.388> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020110704.388>

INTRODUCTION

Traveling and the Journey Theme

The one who saw all I will declare to the world,

The one who knew all I will tell about

[line missing]

He saw the great Mystery, he knew the Hidden:

He recovered the knowledge of all the times before the Flood.

He journeyed beyond the distant, he journeyed beyond exhaustion,

And then carved his story on stone. [stone tablets]

(The Epic of Gilgamesh, 2700 BC, Tablet 1)

In an increasingly globalized and multicultural world travel seems to become the "image of the age" (Euben,

2006, p.1). Travel and journeying in both physical and spiritual forms may be a process toward self-discovery and self-understanding. Euben (2006) argued that, “travel signals both a metaphor for and a practice of journeying... to worlds less familiar, and in terms of which a traveler may come to understand his or her own more deeply and fully” (p.10). In analyzing the journey theme, Martin Day (1974) discussed three essential aspects of it. The first is that journeying is the main theme of life as life itself is a journey from birth to death. The second is the external or internal forces into the journey, and the third aspect, according to Day, is curiosity for the unknown (Day, 1974).

Though the motivations and consequences of travel vary, the experience, in return, reflects the intricacies of the personal, political, and historical. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) asserted that experience is the foundation of any educational practice and is a “moving force” toward developing intellectual and moral growth.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Auto-ethnography is a form of self-narrative, a portrayal of the self in a social context (Burdell & Swadener, 1999; Humphreys, 2005; Spry, 2001) and a research method that blends the personal with the cultural, social, and political (Ellis, 2004). Ethnography is defined as, “creative narratives shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences” (as cited in Patton, 2002, p.9).

In auto-ethnographic writings, and according to traditional psychological studies of the self and identity, “the self exists as an entity that can be discovered and described in much the same way as can any object in the natural or physical world” (Crossley, 2000, p.529). For social constructionism the self is viewed as inseparably dependent on the language and linguistics that are used to make sense of every day life situations. Crossley (2000) argues that, “in making use of such language, we are constantly and perpetually interpreting and changing the meaning of our and other people’s actions, in accordance with our practical and moral tasks” (p.529) Hence, the “self” is understood as a “phenomenon” defined by “interpretation, variability, relativity, flux and difference” (p.529) According to this approach to self understanding, postmodernists admit the “death of the subject” and ; thus, the concept of a one “central and unitary” self is rejected.

The Self, here, is viewed, “in terms of multiplicity of ironic and conflicting interdependent voices that can only be understood contextually, ironically, relationally, and politically” (Slattery, 2001, p.374). However, autoethnography as a scientific research and an academic professional method is associated with risks, as Slattery (2001) cautions:

the risks they identify include gratuitous self – indulgence, the unreliability and inaccessibility of the unconscious,

embarrassing self-exposure alienation from mainstream social science researchers and their grant money, ridicule among peers ... and lack of rigorous scientific standards to evaluate arts-bases autoethnography (p.384).

Pinar (2004), carefully examined and analyzed auto-ethnographic accounts as a form of autobiography in a cultural context that results in “complicated conversations with oneself (as an individual intellectual), an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engaged pedagogical action” (p.37) and, thus, informs and advances curriculum theory.

Autoethnographic texts, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000) are full of “concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness” (p.739). Spry (2001) noted that a good and effective autoethnography is a well-crafted, interwoven piece of writing, and emotionally engaging blend of story and theory. Recent works in autoethnography research identify ways of the thinking of the self as “multiple selves in contexts” (Spry, 2001, p.711)

Methodological strategies in auto/ethno/graphy have been developed so that the researcher may focus on the self/culture/and, or the research as a process (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Other methodologies may include, but not limited to, systematic sociological introspection, biography, personal experiences, feminist’s methods, and autoethnographic performance. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), my ethnographic writing fits into two different categories of autoethnographic writing. The first is referred to as reflexive ethnography, in which the researcher’s personal experiences form the core, as it “illuminates the culture under study” (p.740). The authors noted that “reflexive ethnographers ideally use all their senses, their bodies, movement, feelings, and their whole being — they use the self to learn about the other” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.741). The second category is the evocative personal narrative, in which the ethnographer endeavors at “writing meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference to include sensory and emotional experience” (p.742). In ethnography writing it is common to employ a combination of two or more techniques to reflect the writer’s authentic voice.

METHODOLOGY

I selected the Thematic Analysis method, which is also called Holistic Content Analysis, in Narrative Analysis to analyze my three narratives. In thematic analysis, Riesman (2008) states that the focus is on “what” is said and not on “how” and “to whom” or “for what purposes” it is said. In the preliminary reading stage, I realized that the method presented by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Silber (1998) would inform me of the overarching themes that could be used for further analysis. During my reading

of the three narratives I looked for emerging patterns in the form of foci through the narratives. I also searched for any repetitions, omissions, contradictions, or unfinished descriptions. I used color coding to mark the various themes in the narratives through reading separately and repeatedly for each one. Through color coding I was able to have a general look at the three narratives to realize how much time and space I devoted to each theme. The Thematic Analysis method offered me the information needed to excavate major themes in my three narratives while examining how I performed the "Self" as a "cultural agent" from the "Other" shore.

TRAVELING AND THE ENCOUNTER OF THE OTHER

In the following section, I recount three narratives from my auto-ethnographic account and present as collected data for this research study. The three narratives are entitled: Names and Titles, Dates for Ramadan, and Father's Day. The data presented in these narratives is analyzed in the subsequent section.

NAMES AND TITLES

I enter the classroom and take a seat, noting that several students are already in attendance. Then I take my books, notebook, a pencil and a pen out of my bag and put them on the table. I look at my watch, thinking "I still have 10 minutes before the start of class". Soon, other students begin to show up. "Hi, can I sit here?", a Korean female student asks while pointing to the seat next to me, and I reply, "yes, sure." I continue talking, "I am Methal, I am from Iraq," and she replies, "I am Kim, I am from Taiwan." "Nice to meet you, Kim," I say and she replies, "Nice to meet you, Methal."

As I observe my classmates and future colleagues, I count: four Korean students, two Mexican, and one Indian, and note that the rest of the class consists of American students. Soon, bottles of water and juice, cans of soda, and snacks and chips are laid out on the tables, along with a lot of books, notebooks, and personal laptops. But I have not put anything to drink or eat on my table!

An average-height man in his early sixties, holding a brown bag, enters the classroom. "It looks like he is the professor," I say to myself and wait to see if I am correct. He walks in and takes a seat at the front of the rectangular-shaped tables. Then he puts his big black and white mug of coffee on the table, and takes his books, notes, and a pen out of his bag. He turns to the class and says, "Can you please close the door?" And the young man who sits nearest to the door leaves his seat to close the door. "Thank you," the professor says while still observing the class. He studies us, gazing at one student after another; when he reaches me, he pauses, smiles, and nods his head. I

smile and nod my head in return. Then he continues his scrutiny of the rest of the class until he reaches the last student, on his right. "Hi, looks like we have a large class this semester," he says. Then he introduces himself, "I am professor X.Y.Z. You may call me Professor Z., Professor X., Dr. Z., Dr. X., or, simply, by my first name: X." "What is this?" I say to myself. "How can I address this professor by his first name, without using a title?" Surprised and taken aback by his introduction, I ponder this occurrence for a few moments. I recall memories from academia and my classes back home in Baghdad, and the titles we must use in addressing professors. I say to myself, "different though similar!"

DATES FOR RAMADAN

I dress in a hurry, put on my hair scarf, and walk quickly to the grocery store in hopes of finding some dates to break my fast with. It is one hour before *iftar* time, the fast-breaking meal for Muslims, in Ramadan, the month of fasting. It is the fifth day of my second Ramadan in the U.S. and I am in the Herbs and Natural Foods section at the grocery store. I ask an employee whether they have any dates today and he points out a box that has been put aside, and says, "Yes, we received this box today. It is the only box of dates." I could not hide the big smile on my face and the joy and delight I felt in my heart; finally, I will have some dates on my *iftar* table! I ask him whether I can pick out some dates with my bare fingers, and he replies, "Yes, ma'am, you can." But while I am filling a small nylon bag with some dates, imagining myself eating them within the hour, I notice an elderly white woman staring at me. She approaches me and says, "You cannot use your bare fingers to pick up these dates. Your hands are full of germs and you will contaminate the whole box." I look at her, seeing an elderly woman in her eighties, dressed in a gray and white outfit. Her gray hair and black glasses remind me of my mom, back home, though my mom is younger and has a slightly heavier build. I look at her, and reply, "I am sorry ma'am, but the worker told me that I can use my bare fingers." She looks angrily at me, but does not reply, and does not leave the area either. I add a few more dates to my nylon bag and then close it; then I hurry to the checkout lane to pay for these precious dates, imagining them laid out on the small china dish that I use only during Ramadan. It is a magic dish; at *iftar* time, it takes me back home in my mind, seats me at the family dining table, and lets me see and hear my mom and sister. I can even see my sons and my nephew when they were young, playing, shouting, and competing to see who would sit at the head of the dining table. With my magic china dish, I can even smell the traditional Iraqi dishes of Ramadan.

Waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store, I realize there are only 20 minutes left before it is time to

break my fast. But the cashier cannot find the product code for dates on his list and he asks another employee to go to the produce section and check the number for him; turning to me he says, "It will only be a few moments, ma'am," and I reply, "oh, sure, thank you." A few moments pass and the other worker does not return; another five, and then ten minutes pass and, still, he has not returned. Now there are only a few minutes remaining before *iftar* time and I am very tired, thirsty, and hungry, but this is all right as long as I can have the dates for my *iftar*! At last, the worker returns, but with empty hands. He apologizes for his delay, and tells us that there is a problem with purchasing the dates. An elderly white woman is complaining about a lady with a hair scarf who filled a nylon bag with dates using her bare fingers. She is saying that the lady with the hair scarf must be charged for the whole box of dates, because she contaminated it!

I turn my face away, and can hardly lift my feet to walk out of the store. I feel so tired, like my legs are too weak to hold me up. "It is all right, Methal. No dates for the sixth day of Ramadan," I say to myself as I am leaving the store. Suddenly, someone runs after me, shouting, "I am sorry, ma'am. Please, here are your dates; you may pay for them now." Then I pay for my dates and walk out of the grocery store.

When I finally arrive at my apartment, it is half an hour after the fast breaking time. I put the dates in the china dish, and look at them. Then I sit at my dining table and slowly stretch out the fingers of my right hand to pick up one date. My cheeks are wet; my date also gets wet!

FATHER'S DAY

It is Saturday June 18, 2006 and I am visiting with a friend and her family to celebrate Father's Day. At first, when I received my friend's invitation, it sounded strange, but I said to myself, "Well, there is a Mother's Day why not a Father's Day!" I put on my jacket, hair scarf, and shoes, and pick up my handbag and sit down on the couch to wait for my friend to come and pick me up.

At her family's home, I meet her parents, two sisters and their boyfriends, and her grandmother. Everyone is so excited, "as soon as I heard that an Iraqi student was visiting my son's family I decided to come and join them. I have never met an Iraqi!" the grandmother says and sits next to me. She asks, "How long have you been here? How do you find the U.S.? Do you like it? Are you enjoying your time? Were you invited to visit with other American families?" I prepare myself for a long, lovely night of Q & A. One of the girls hesitantly asks, "Girls marry through arranged marriage in Iraq, right?" I listen to this and other questions that they have and then I say, "I am so glad you all are asking these questions". Then I turn to the rest of my friend's family members and say, "I will be glad to answer all of your questions. Please, don't hesitate." And then I begin with the grandmother's

questions.

"Please, everyone, stop asking our guest questions. I bet she is tired now. Dinner is ready, so let's move to the dining room," my friend's mother says. We move to the dining room, my friend turns off the lights and lights the candles, and we stand in a circle, holding each other's hands, and then they start praying. After the prayers, we sit down at the dining table and we eat and chat.

"Would you like to drink your coffee in the living room?" my friend's mother asks. "Yes, please," I reply. My friend brings out mugs of coffee, and we all sit around in the living room. "Ok, it's presents time," my friend's mom says and everyone gives his/her present to "dad". Lots of hugs and kisses are given all around and this fills the room with a lovely feeling of family and appreciation for my friend's father. We then sit down, sipping our coffee, and go back to the Q & A session. My hosts ask more questions, and I am delighted to answer; they ask questions about all kinds of things in Iraq. The young ladies ask about love, marriage and divorce, and clothing and the practice of hair covering; the men ask about politics and the Sunni/Shiat conflict. My friend's grandmother and mother ask about the Iraqi educational system, food and the preparation of dishes, and personal questions about my family, personal educational achievements, and profession.

When it is almost 10:00 pm, I pick up my handbag and look at my friend and say, "it was such a lovely evening, thank you all for inviting me to share this special day with you. Thank you for your hospitality and for the delicious dishes. It was a pleasure meeting you". I say this while standing up and shaking hands with my friend's family members and guests. When I get to her grandmother, while shaking her hand, she says, "It was a pleasure meeting you, too. To tell the truth, I never imagined I would meet such an educated Iraqi woman who is covered, but speaks wonderful English. Your English is excellent!" I ponder for a moment and then reply, "thank you ma'am. It was a pleasure meeting you."

FINDINGS AND EMERGING THEMES

My auto-ethnographic narratives are stories that lend themselves to the formation of global impression evoking a strong sense of continuous attempts to positively interact with the "Other," in this context, Americans. I narrated the "Self" as an individual and relational to the "Other," thus, the narratives reflect intrapersonal as well as interpersonal descriptions. As a reader to my personal narratives, I see spaces of cultural disconnection leaning more toward "Self" actualization rather than alienation. The "Other" plays an important role in constructing my "Self" in these three narratives. According to Ochberg (1994), "the stories we tell about ourselves are shaped by our personalities and by the inter-subjective codes of our communities."(p.116) I continuously try to fit the "Self"

in the new socio-cultural construction as a cultural agent who is embracing cross-culture “negotiation rather than negation” (Bhabha, 1994, p.69)

As I was moving forward to analyze my “self” in the three narratives, I was stuck. I was unable to analyze my “self” objectively. Accordingly, I decided to refer to my “self” with an Arabic female name, Nuha, in the analysis and discussion sections. I make no associations to Nuha since I don’t know anyone personally by that name. Doing this helped me proceed with my analysis. As a result, I recognize three overarching themes of “Cultural Identity”, “Appearance and Reality,” “Bridging the Gaps.” The three themes are reflected in each one of the three narratives; however, each narrative has one major theme that I will focus on in the findings section.

The first theme, of cultural identity, manifests itself in Names and Titles. Nuha, in this narrative, reflects on her cultural norms in addressing professors in academia. She is surprised at her professor’s gesture of allowing his students to call him by his first name. In Nuha’s culture, one’s title, be it academic, professional, or social, is an important component of one’s cultural identity. And a person’s title suggests a special social code that, in turn, stimulates specific cultural responses. In addition, sometimes the use of a title alone is sufficient to address a person. Older people, teachers and professors, high officials, and people with specific job titles, such as physicians and university professors are mostly addressed by their titles only. More specific, in Nuha’s culture, the Arabic and Islamic culture, teachers and professors have a high social status; therefore, must be addressed by their titles. Another aspect of cultural identity reflected in Names and Titles is that of eating and drinking in classrooms. In Nuha’s culture, eating and drinking in classrooms is prohibited for students, and professors rarely drink in their classrooms. Nuha recalls, in one of her classes back home, that a professor was obligated to tell his students about his health condition; since he was diagnosed with diabetes and had to drink water during the lecture. Nuha completed her first semester without eating or drinking anything in any classroom.

The second theme, of appearance and reality, is apparent in Nuha’s contemplation of the elderly white woman’s appearance that contradicts her behavior toward Nuha. While the image of a mother figure is assumed to bring forth feelings of love, caring, and safety, this was not the case for Nuha. Another example in this theme is the instance where the elderly white woman uses the words “germs” and “contamination” in regard to Nuha. These words are derogatory in nature and, moreover, they hold serious connotations, associating Nuha with people who are ignorant or stupid. The elderly white woman judged Nuha’s level of education based only on her appearance as a “covered” Muslim woman, and through one single behavior, that of picking up few dates with her bear fingers. Negative stereotypes about Muslim women

as illiterate, ignorant, and backward has helped create an inferior Muslim cultural identity in the West. More specifically, Muslim woman with *hijab* have become provocative forms to Westerners as, the *hijab* is viewed “more than simply a religious representation of Muslim women to the West; rather, it conveys a Muslim culture in its political, social, religious, and historical aspects” (as cited in Mohammed, 2009, p.9).

The third and last theme of bridging the gaps manifested itself mainly in the third narrative as Nuha gladly accepts her friend’s invitation to join a family celebration, and, as a result, she interacts and communicates with the Other. Although the occasion was unfamiliar to Nuha, she was willing to interact with her hosting family and learn about their culture, American culture. Another example of this theme is evident in Nuha’s openness and welcoming response to her hosting family in answering all of their questions. And, finally, a third example is when Nuha accepts the Christian host family tradition of praying together in a circle. Though a Muslim, Nuha respectfully joins her hosting family in their collective prayer in reflection to her respect to other religions.

DISCUSSION

Cultures, according to Kessing (1974) can be mainly defined as adaptive or ideational. Adaptive systems are cultural systems where human communities are connected to their ecological systems. Cultural concepts, thus, become mainly associated with behavior patterns and people’s ways of life. While in ideational systems culture is approached as a system of ideas through: 1) cognitive system of knowledge, 2) structural system, and 3) a symbolic system. Ideational theorists argue that culture, “consists of standards for deciding what is...for deciding what can be...for deciding what one feels about it...for deciding what to do about it...and for deciding how to go about doing it” (as cited in Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1996, p.4).

Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) tried to find an appropriate location for the confrontation of two cultures in the postcolonial period. Cultures, according to Bhabha (1994), meet in a “third space,” an “unrepresentable liminal space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (p.56). For Bhabha, space is an imaginary “zone” where cultures encounter one another to “negotiate rather than negate” their differences. It is in this “third space,” an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications that opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference” (Bhabha, 1994, p.5)

In cross-culture communication, it is argued that “culture and communication are terms that represent two different viewpoints or methods of representation of patterned and structured interconnectedness” (as cited in Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996, p.4). Cross-

culture researchers argue that cultural differences and similarities can be explained according to four dimensions of cultural variability: individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and masculinity-femininity (Gudykunst et al, 1996). One major dimension is that of the individualism-collectivism cultural characteristic. On group level, members of individualistic cultures; such as, American and the Western cultures, value independence and achievement and view themselves as “unique persons,” while collectivistic cultures; such as, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, value harmony and solidarity and view their interconnectedness with others in reflection to their collective identity. In addition, cultural individualism-collectivism has a reciprocal influence on individuals’ behavior in terms of norms, rules, and “personalities, values, and self construal” (Gudykunst et al, p.21). On personal level, it is noted that the values that individuals hold influence cultural individualism-collectivism communication since “values are the core of individuals’ personalities...and enhance their self-esteem” (as cited in Gudykunst, 1996, p.26) Therefore, cultural identities are the results of cultural norms, practices, and belief systems that govern each culture. Hall (1989) differentiated two ways of thinking about cultural identities. The first is defined on the basis of the, “idea of one, shared culture, a sort of collective one true self, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed selves which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (p.69) While the other way of defining cultural identity is based on similarities and profound differences that not only define “what we really are” but also “what we have become,” thus, cultural identity becomes a “matter of becoming as well as being” (Hall, 1989, p.70).

Giroux and McLaren (1994) argued that cultural differences in pedagogical practices are spaces that can be developed in a way that enables students to re-present their “own histories differently” (p.51) by rewriting them. By doing so, critical educators allow for a “counter narrative of emancipation in which new visions, spaces, desires and discourses can be developed” (p.51).

In their study of autobiography, self, and culture Wang & Brockmeier (2002) investigated autobiographical samples from American and Chinese cultures and found that in American sample the individual was portrayed as the “leading character of the story” while the Chinese sample reflected “sensitivity to information about significant others or about the self in relation to the others” (p.49). They concluded that people in different cultures tend to take different forms of self representations to illustrate different themes of how the self is culturally perceived. Auto-bio/ethnography, then is an effective tool to present/re-present the self in different cultural contexts that may enhance cross-cultural negotiation and promote better understanding of the Other.

CONCLUSION

Being a Muslim woman in the U.S. after 9/11 and an Iraqi in the U.S. after 2003 has added more complexity to my situation as a cultural agent. After 9/11, Muslims have been viewed as “savage” people and Islam as a “barbarian religion” (Said, 1979, p.171) rather than a religion of peace. More specifically, Muslim women with their dress codes, *hijab*, are not viewed as innocent sights anymore. Their *hijab* is viewed /interpreted as a means of resistance to the Western social, cultural, and religious norms. Thus, Muslim women with *hijab* have become the “victims” of politicized Islam (Mohammed, 2009)

As I look at how I preformed my cultural identity in my three narratives, I can see how different cultures shape our personalities differently. Our cultures govern our actions/reactions, ways of communication and interaction with the Other, and our learning about the Other.

However, learning, as Luzio-Lockett (1998) argues is a holistic process, “an emotional and cognitive experience” and a process of “self actualization and growth” (p.219) that can not be achieved through academic work solely nor through individual efforts only. Learning in cross-culture communication is/should be a mutual process that brings better understanding, respect, and appreciation of the Other.

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