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Culturally and Linguistically Humble: A Preparation for Living Abroad

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Culturally and Linguistically Humble: A Preparation for Living Abroad

Abstract

Presented in 2016 at Baekseok University in Cheonan City, South Korea at the 8th international conference of the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education (IAPCHE), this paper lays out the rationale for the approach taken in Northwestern College's required preparations for students studying abroad. Elements in the preparation include getting students to identify influences on them of their home culture; to talk about their motivations and goals for studying abroad; to engage with Duane Elmer's *Cross-Cultural Connections* and David Smith's *Learning from the Stranger*, and perhaps most importantly, to engage with E. Hockett, L. Samek, and S. Headley's "Cultural Humility: A Framework for Local and Global Engagement," *ICCTE Journal* 8:1 (2013).

About the Author

Dr. Diana Gonzalez' main interests revolve around how languages function and behave, especially in fields related to language in society and meaning. She has presented on those topics at national conferences of the North American Christian Foreign Language Association. Prior to joining Northwestern's faculty, Dr. Gonzalez served with Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics, teaching at the Ricardo Palma University in Lima, Perú. Originally from Argentina, she also taught Spanish and German at Dordt College, as well as graduate and undergraduate linguistic courses at the universities of Chihuahua and Zacatecas in Mexico, and worked as an editor for a publishing ministry in Costa Rica.

Culturally and Linguistically Humble:

A Preparation for Living Abroad

by Diana Gonzalez, Ph.D.

Presented at the 8th international conference of the
International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education
Baekseok University, Cheonan City, South Korea
2016

1. Introduction

While watching “The Amazing Race” show, I caught myself reflecting on the different ways participants faced their obstacles. Some seemed to adjust rather quickly and “go with the flow:” enjoying celebrations, dancing with the people, smiling to everyone; others were complaining about everything being different from home at all times and observing the worst in every stranger. A third group tended to get paralyzed, suffering a complete disorientation: they felt lost, did not know how to ask the right questions, walked in circles, and declared defeat even before starting the search. Usually, they were the first to get disqualified.

It is not easy to find oneself in tune with a culture that is not her own.

Likewise, thinking of being away from home in an unfamiliar country during a whole semester was daunting for our students and also their parents, especially if they had little experience with travelling or living abroad for a long period of time. Although some had participated in weeklong service trips to a Central American country, they went with members of

their church and were never on their own. They did not live with host families or travel across an unfamiliar city without company. Students in the Spanish major, required to study a semester abroad in a Spanish-speaking country, had many expectations and fears, but no space to discuss those or to work toward understanding cultural differences and coping with the many difficulties, which could surge during the time abroad.

Therefore, a one-credit course cross-cultural preparation for the study-abroad semester was conceived as an answer to students’ as well as parents’ concerns. In addition, students needed to enroll in another one-credit course while studying abroad—Enhancing the Study-Abroad Experience—which intended to accompany them and prompt students to reflect on and evaluate their experiences.

As a result, both courses pursued the following goals:

- 1) To better prepare students culturally for the experiences they would encounter abroad;
- 2) To help students understand their personal and Christian identity in their own culture;
- 3) To encourage students to think about how to respond as Christians to cultural diversity and about their role in a foreign culture;
- 4) To maintain contact with students throughout their study abroad experience so that they have a sense of belonging;
- 5) To gather feedback from students about the study abroad programs and our own Modern Foreign Language program in order to assist us in our self-assessment.

2. Students lack knowledge about the influence of culture

Through the years, it became evident that students were not aware of how much and how deeply culture had influenced all of their life, including their Christian faith and identity.

In consequence, an important element of their preparation is to get them to identify objects that are part of their everyday life and cultural values they have been raised with, such as advice or phrases they heard very often in their homes. When doing this, they discover a similar pattern in their upbringing. In addition, they are able to identify priorities in their scale of values. These exercises help them to see the influence of their home culture in their Christianity as well.

Equipped with this knowledge, when being abroad, students are better prepared to separate what is cultural from what is an essential Christian principle. This helps them to be more flexible and to stay open to new spiritual insights.

Defining motivations and goals for going abroad

At the beginning of the course, students need to talk about motivations and goals for studying abroad. They express themselves freely about what they want to achieve in that period of time. Even when this is a requisite for graduation for all Spanish majors, most students are eager to spend a semester in a Spanish-speaking country and learn the most they can during those months.

However, some are not so willing to go because other situations in their lives have priority at this particular moment. It could happen that they do not disclose those factors during the preparation period, and later it becomes clear that their ability to adjust and their resilience to difficulties and frustrations is significantly lower. Therefore, it is important to create a safe place where they can be honest about themselves and share their conflicts of interest.

It is also relevant to make students aware of differences in short-term and long-term goals. Many express their desire to understand everybody and everything in the foreign language during their first week in the host country, which is very unlikely. They are used to a fast pace in life and quick answers: Google finds information in seconds, phones are always on, and online stores deliver packages in one or two days. For this reason, it is important to make clear to students that mastering the language of their host country is a long-term goal, and that they will encounter plenty of situations where they will not understand anything the other person is saying.

Adjusting to a new culture or subculture

In addition, college implies an adjustment to a new subculture. In our course, it will be discussed how hard it was for them their first semester and what things bothered them during their first college weeks. Focusing on those past experiences helps them to relate to what could be difficult in their adjustment to a new culture.

3. Intention of maintaining community: essential to Northwestern College identity

As mentioned above, community is essential to the Northwestern College identity. We want students to feel comfortable in their experiences abroad. We also want to provide them a listening ear for their sufferings or their celebrations away from home.

Both the preparation and accompanying courses were not available for students five years ago, and this is always a surprise for our students today. They cannot imagine the absence of a space for discussing what lies ahead and how to approach those new learning environments.

One goal of this time together is preparing students for culture shock and periods of profound disorientation while living abroad. Discussing symptoms and possible ways of coping with those negative thoughts and feelings is key.

Another important objective is preparing them for being transformed by the experience of living a semester in a different culture. Being fully present in the host country is essential if we want them to grow and be agents of reconciliation in the world.

Thus, we insist on the need of reflection on the knowledge acquired and how it impacts their lives and prepares them for future service in more diverse situations, promoting global engagement.

4. Finding materials to guide the discussion

There is a plethora of books related to cultural issues. Some focus on **cultural awareness**, the first level for raising awareness of the existence of others who are different. In general, questions on cultural awareness do not lead to transformation and hardly help to develop a broader worldview. Results are limited and they tend to affirm what was already known.

Books on **cultural intelligence** provide knowledge for navigating differences among cultures. As Bennet (2004) states, “In general terms, intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (p. 149). Furthermore, Earley and Ang (2003) theorized the following,

[Cultural intelligence] is a multidimensional concept that includes metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral dimensions. CQ as a multifactor construct is based on Sternberg and Detterman's (1986) framework of the multiple foci of intelligence.

Sternberg integrated the myriad views on intelligence to propose four complementary ways to conceptualize individual-level intelligence: (a) metacognitive intelligence is knowledge and control of cognition (the processes individuals use to acquire and understand knowledge); (b) cognitive intelligence is individual knowledge and knowledge structures; (c) motivational intelligence acknowledges that most cognition is motivated and thus it focuses on magnitude and direction of energy as a locus of intelligence; and (d) behavioral intelligence focuses on individual capabilities at the action level (behavior). (p. 4)

These materials concentrate mainly on the importance of multiple intelligences for succeeding when living in a different culture.

Another set of materials, related to cultural intelligence, specializes in **cultural sensitivity**. According to Chen (1997), intercultural sensitivity can be conceptualized as "an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes an appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (p. 6).

In addition, Bennet (2004) states, “the underlying assumption of the model is that as one’s *experience of cultural difference* becomes more sophisticated, one’s competence in intercultural relations increases” (p. 152).

The developmental model for cultural sensitivity considers experience of difference and goes from ethnocentric stages of denial, defense, and minimization to ethnorelative stages of acceptance, adaptation, and integration. In other words, the individual goes from a monocultural mindset to an intercultural one.

Although the described information is important and very useful, it is not intended for producing a transformation in the lives of those on the verge of living abroad, but for helping them to notice probable differences and provide tools to help them adjust.

However, our course seeks to prepare Christian students for learning about themselves, God, and others they encounter in their daily living in the host country and, through those encounters being transformed, getting a broader understanding of humans as God’s image bearers.

5. Adoption of books written from a Christian perspective

Therefore, the decision was to adopt books written from a Christian perspective, which not only address cultural issues but also faith matters and interpretation of beliefs in relation to culture.

Two distinct books were adopted: one being more practical and sharing experiences from the mission field—*Cross-Cultural Connections*, the other more broadly oriented and reflecting on Bible passages and interaction with culture in the academic field—*Learning from the Stranger*.

Both authors, Duane Elmer (*Cross-Cultural Connections*, 2002) and David Smith (*Learning from the Stranger*, 2009), have a long experience in living and serving in other countries, and preparing students to be faithful Kingdom citizens when interacting with foreigners, not only abroad but also in their home country.

The books complement each other and provide examples drawn from real situations. They also include interpretations of Biblical passages from a deep cultural view, as well as added insights usually not considered.

In addition, readers can hear the voice of the authors when they share their own experiences when entering a different culture—facing other values, ignoring language cues, the meaning of gestures and body language, their own mistakes and the mistakes of others. In this way, they can learn not only about cultural differences, but also vulnerability, honesty, and that failing once does not mean to be a failure; there are ways of repairing gaffes and learning from them.

Students can also learn about their own culture when they read of ways other people may perceive them when living abroad. They can approach those settings thinking about how they would react in the same circumstances and, in consequence, make adjustments and decisions that would help them in the future.

As explained before, cross-cultural preparation is based on personal reflection on issues of self, cultural identity, otherness, and Christian faith.

Janine Paden-Morgan (2010) states, “Deep transformation is not a given. Although travel does expand world-views, it does not automatically transform someone from one state to another, magically conferring new, spiritually-improved lives” (p. 34).

6. Adding an approach from the perspective of cultural humility

During the last biennial IAPCHE conference held at the Prince Center at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, I attended Professor Hockett’s presentation on cultural humility. I

found the approach to be highly relevant for our cross-cultural preparation course at Northwestern College and included “Cultural Humility: A Framework for Local and Global Engagement” (Hockett, Samek & Headley, 2013) as the first reading for the course.

The article describes “the experiences and reflections, as well as personal and professional applications of three faculty members from George Fox University ... [who] have participated extensively in global engagement experiences” (p. 117).

In the same paper, they refer to “the concept of cultural humility, as presented by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998), that emerged from the medical disciplines. It incorporates ‘a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the patient-physician dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations’” (p. 117).

Important tenets of this approach are lifelong commitment, self-evaluation and self-critique, and mutually beneficial solidarity partnerships, in the sense of not being based on hierarchy but on a level of equality.

Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington and Utsay (2013) defined cultural humility “as having an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented rather than self-focused, characterized by respect and lack of superiority toward an individual’s cultural background and experience” (p. 353). The authors stated as well,

...therapists who are culturally humble not only strive to be effective but also cultivate a growing awareness that they are inevitably limited in their knowledge and understanding of a client’s cultural background, which motivates them to interpersonally attune

themselves to the client in a quest to understand the individual client’s cultural background and experience. (p. 354)

If the word “therapists” were replaced by the word “students”, and the term “client” by “hosts” or “host-country nationals”, it would point to an important objective when preparing students for leaving their own country and studying a semester abroad.

According to Tangney (2000), key elements of humility include:

- accurate assessment of one’s abilities and achievements [...]
- ability to acknowledge one’s mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations [...]
- openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice.
- keeping of one’s abilities and accomplishments —one’s place in the world—in perspective [...]
- relatively low self-focus [...], while recognizing that one is but one part of the larger universe.
- appreciation of the value of all things, as well as the many different ways that people and things can contribute to our world. (p. 73-74)

She also states, “In relinquishing the very human tendency toward an egocentric focus, persons with humility become ever more open to recognizing the abilities, potential, worth, and importance of others” (Tangney, 2000, p. 73).

In relation to the statements above, an important objective of the cross-cultural preparation is moving from periods of confusion and disorientation in the foreign country toward growth in the ability of learning from others and accepting new ideas and perspectives.

Unfortunately, humility has often been understood as “having a lowly opinion of oneself; meekness, lowliness” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) and not valued as a relevant virtue for fostering empathic and respectful cultural interactions by people who prioritize competency.

However, in contrast to popular views, the Bible holds humility in high regard, and relates it to wisdom and fear of the Lord. For example, “The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honor” (Prov. 15:33, NRSV); “The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life” (Prov. 22:4, NRSV); “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col. 3:12, NRSV).

Therefore, introducing an approach from the perspective of humility infuses in students the desire of relating to others and being open to learn from them. Because this is wise, they are free to consider themselves fallible and in the process of becoming more knowledgeable; they can begin to think globally and leave their parochial views behind.

Besides, confronting the initial situation of disorientation in the host country demands a deeper level of engagement in questioning self and others. Questions asked without pride but with the intention to establish a connection and to learn from others and their circumstances can overcome the cultural barrier and open a path to acquire new insights and to share about one’s own cultural background. As Miroslav Volf (1996) stated,

We are who we are not because we are separate from the others who are next to us, but because we are both separate and connected, both distinct and related; the boundaries that mark our identities are both barriers and bridges. (p. 66)

Enriching the level of involvement in questioning self and other cultures

Humility helps to avoid quick judgment because it “may attenuate the tendency for therapists to overvalue their own perspectives and worldviews” (Hook et al., 2013, p. 361).

Most readings emphasize the idea that cultures are not right or wrong but that they are different. Although “Christians have fervent convictions about ethical matters that they need to articulate[,t]hey also need to learn how to suspend judgment, appreciate other understandings of morality, and tolerate other points of view, even about essential truths of their faith” (Morgan & Toms Smedley, 2010, p. 55).

Thus, the intention when comparing values in different cultures is that a student grows to become a Christian who “can recognize multiple ethical systems, appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of them, and carefully considers what it means to act Christianly within the context of a given culture” (Morgan & Toms Smedley, 2010, p. 128).

For this reason, creating spaces for reflection on past experiences, the values inherited from parents and grandparents, and the hidden rules in their own culture and subcultures offer students opportunities to learn more about who they are and how their culture influenced all areas of their life. In relation to it, one student expressed,

I inherited the idea that work is very important: “Finish your work and you’ll have time to play.” When I was a girl I always had to finish my chores before playing with my sister or my friends. Sometimes, my father did not pause to talk to people when he wanted to finish something. This idea is very useful when I need to do my homework, but it stands in the way of making friends. It could be difficult getting used to cultures in which relations are more important than work. (2015)

Other rules mentioned by students, which signaled some degree of commonness in their upbringings were “You have to eat all your meal to get dessert,” “Go to church every Sunday,” “Turn off the lights when you leave the room,” “Clean up after yourself,” and many more. It was fun to see how those phrases elicited memories, which were accompanied with laughter and jokes.

These types of comparisons helped to identify values they shared, typical to the sub-culture they grew into, which often they took for universal.

It is also a safe place to talk about fears—linguistic inadequacy, rejection, homesickness, fitting in, etc. Some comments along the years read,

- I am a little afraid of the language. Often it is difficult for me to talk with people who are fluent. I get nervous when I speak with native speakers because I make errors and feel frustrated (2013).
- I am afraid of being rejected. It is difficult to be the new kid in the neighborhood, and not everyone is friendly. [...] I am also afraid of feeling imprisoned in my own mind, not being able to make myself understood (2013).
- I am afraid of missing my family too much... and also the food I like (2014).
- I fear not getting along with the host family (2014).

Students feel free to express their vulnerability. The readings help them to see the importance of relinquishing the idea of being the center, as well as the need to give up control. It is an opportunity to rely on God and trust other people, like the host family, the teachers in the program, etc.

Questions and reflective responses bring opportunities to start a transformation that will continue the following semester, while immersed in the foreign culture.

Providing ways to grow and be transformed

One of the essential considerations is that the process of transformation does not stop when the semester ends or even when students return home from their time abroad. Most times, when they are back, they are still processing all experiences they lived; often, this continues after they graduate and beyond.

When the daily amount of new experiences and information saturates the whole being (brain, emotions, etc.), processing inputs may take a long time. For this reason, it is essential to create a discipline of reflection.

At the end of the preparation course, one of the student’s comments in their final essay reads,

Not to be a tourist in the other culture, but a student: a “learner.” I need to have the attitude of not being the hero or the savior of the other culture, but the attitude of learning about and sharing in customs, lifestyles, etc. Another idea is not spending lots of time taking pictures or visiting beautiful landscapes, but wanting to spend more time with the *people* in that country. (2014)

As Paden-Morgan (2010) states, “The idea of being present in the here and now is a call to experience and depend on God at every moment” (p. 37).

Other comments were as follows:

- Some valuable points are: the importance of identifying our expectations, the symptoms of culture shock, the depth of our culture, time and event, and the

beauty of the differences. I have learned about the importance of avoiding judgment without knowledge of the whole situation, asking respectful questions and that differences are not wrong. In addition, my culture is not always right and is not the best. As a Christian, I am an ambassador of Christ, and my actions and attitudes must reflect God’s love and acceptance (2015).

- Without any doubt I am a categorical person. I don’t like to mix my personal life with my work, and it is strange when my life at the college blends into my family life in Orange City. I see life in time segments: a week, a semester, a year, the four years of college...However, I want to live my life in Spain more like a tapestry, where everything is interconnected, not simply as a moment in time (2014).
- It is important to develop good attitudes and to adapt to the idea of time in the culture we are going to live (2014).
- I like the idea of God speaking to us in a voice that is not from our culture of origin. I need to hear the voice of God while I am abroad, but maybe I am going to hear it in different ways than here (2013).

Students’ final essays communicate the beginning of a transformation that will increase its pace and extension while living in the foreign country. They also express a readiness to go, as well as growth in confidence and resolution.

7. Adding readings and questions to guide reflection and discussion

I consider it valuable to emphasize humility not only in the Cross-Cultural Preparation, but also in the course that follows: Enhancing Study-Abroad Experience. The readings on humility will guide the conversation not only on campus but also while students are in their semester abroad.

When I asked students to read “Cultural Humility: A Framework for Local and Global Engagement” (Hockett, Samek & Headley, 2013), the content resonated heavily with them. One of the students wrote in her final essay,

I also learned that it is important to be humble and accept that my experience will not be perfect regarding language and culture, and I need to be conscious of this during my time in the host country. I cannot be perfect or totally prepared, and nobody thinks I can either (2016).

Adding materials that explore definitions and characteristics of humility would influence not only their reflections, but also their life. Questions like, “What are the implications of humility for interpersonal relationships? Does humility have hidden individual costs? How does the characteristic of humility relate to people’s quest for education and new knowledge?” (Tangney, 2000, p. 76) offer a rich opportunity for discussion and future reflection.

8. Along the study-abroad semester

During the Enhancing the Study-Abroad Experience course, participants are requested to answer questions that focus on their experiences over the past weeks in the host country and

guide their reflection on what and how they live every day. In the future, a question related to cultural humility will be included in each one of the assignments they need to complete.

For example, one prompt could be to consider an idea discussed during the preparation course:

“...Humility represents wisdom, is a key to progress, and is characterized by an open and receptive mind, an ability to acknowledge one’s mistakes, an openness to new ideas and advice, and keeping oneself in proper perspective.” They would reflect on how humility has guided their interactions in different settings, mentioning positive as well as negative outcomes, and evaluating what they would keep or change next time.

Other questions could address dynamics in power imbalance situations, effects on relationships, etc.

In addition, Biblical texts addressing humility would provide an appropriate framework to continue the conversation.

Although the semester-abroad had produced transformations in students, as conveyed by their final reflection papers in general, in the past some of those tended to express degrees of frustration and suffering, like the following comments illustrate:

- I had to admit that I could not do things alone and I needed help. I was in a weak position—I could not express myself as I wanted, I could not travel because I did not know the city, I could not go shopping because I did not know the stores and the products they sold. I am very independent, and this cost me a lot, but taught me that I need other people in my life (2012).
- It was hard for me to have the attitude to learn. I had to face that I was not able to survive by myself in a culture different from mine. [...] I wanted to be fluent in

Spanish, and each joke about my Spanish, even in a friendly tone, reminded me that I was short of reaching my goal. In addition, I always had been a good student and was not accustomed to fail (2012).

Therefore, focusing on humility before students leave will allow discussions about how to face the challenges of the new country with a humble disposition. It would especially stress the need to have a readiness to acknowledge one’s mistakes, imperfections, and gaps in knowledge and to be open to contradictory information and new ways in even simple things, without losing courage or perspective of one’s abilities and accomplishments.

As another student expressed, “I would have liked a deeper approach to how we would live and how our expectations could be affirmed, rejected or changed” (2014). Then, working from the perspective of humility would allow pointing to attitudes of openness to newness, self-evaluation, and self-critique.

One of the students also said that she was “beginning to embrace the Spanish language” (2012). Miroslav Volf (1996) stated,

Open arms are a gesture of the body reaching for the other. They are a sign of discontent with my own self-enclosed identity, a code of desire for the other. More than just a code for desire, open arms are a sign that I have created space in myself for the other to come in and that I have made a movement out of myself so as to enter the space created by the other. (p. 141)

In addition, Thomas Merton (1979) expressed, “The world is made up of the people who are fully alive in it: that is, of the people who can be themselves in it and can enter into a living and fruitful relationship with each other in it” (p. 3).

9. The need for cultivating cultural humility in the language learning courses

Acceptance of linguistic and cultural differences is essential when learning a foreign language. It requires a great amount of patience and the capacity of enduring in spite of mistakes and those sneaky words that constantly hide in the unreachable corners of the memory.

Then, an attitude of perpetual learning is necessary when trying to increase the linguistic repertoire and gaining fluency in a language that is not one's first.

Humility is, in consequence, a key element for learning a foreign language. Therefore, it is important to present this idea to students who desire to embark in the learning of another tongue, and especially to students who major in a foreign language.

Students pursuing a foreign language major need to cultivate patience and a sense of contentment with every little progress they make. Often they want to advance to the next level without giving themselves the time their brain needs to make the necessary connections. They tend to get frustrated with their linguistic errors and soon feel discouraged. Sometimes, they get angry because the foreign language is very different from their mother tongue and start to blame it for their mistakes.

Nevertheless, applying self-control, appreciating differences, and embracing mistakes in order to learn and improve performance, although difficult, help not only in the classroom but also in the real world.

Self-evaluation and self-critique, when constructive, add a useful tool for daily reflection on the level achieved.

10. Conclusion

Finally, cultural humility is a valuable approach in preparing students for living and learning abroad. To focus on the other, to learn from the strangers, and to seek power dynamics based on equality enrich the experience of living in a foreign country and contribute to transformation into global citizens of God’s world.

Acceptance of lack of knowledge and impossibility of perfection, but willingness to learn more and being open to consider the other —the stranger— as the teacher; recognition of the value of every person, and appreciation of his or her contributions; collaboration with others to reach better outcomes in a dynamic of solidarity; positive changes in oneself and in the relationship with others, being wise and keeping a balanced view of oneself; thereby, the often misunderstood Christian virtue of humility calls students, and everyone else, to remember and put into practice Micah 6:8 (NRSV),

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

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