

**Teaching Abroad Is More Than Teaching:
Language and Socio/Cultural Issues.**

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In the workshop, Miryam and Debra, lead the participants into their journey of disability and illiteracy that they lived while teaching in South Korea. During the workshop, they shared their stories and provided hands-on-experiences that opened multivocal social spaces that enabled participants to share and discuss issues regarding language/power and powerlessness. The outcome was a deep, emotional exchange in which everyone experienced Otherness, disability and illiteracy not only theoretically but also as they might be experienced by our “usual informants” while enacting qualitative research.

Methods, techniques, modes of inquiry

Debra’s and Miryam’s intent for the workshop was to share both sublime and insignificant moments of their Korean teaching/living experience. Using an evocative telling (Kondo 1990) they created fictionalized selves (Slattery 1998) and experimented with narrative forms (Behar 1996; Richardson 1998; Williams 1991) that brought into the workshop a multiplicity of stories that included their researcher as well as their participant roles. (Geertz 1995; Marcus 1998; Fischer 1986; Winterson 1995).

Miryam, Debra, and the workshop participants explored three specific themes: recognition of Otherness, desire for the familiar, and moments of translation. To create an environment steeped in a multiplicity of voices and understandings, Debra and Miryam shared a multimedia presentation in which they had a virtual conversation reflecting on their journey. What follows are excerpts from their media presentation.

Editorial Note:

For these proceedings, we are adapting our workshop environment, changing it from a multimedia, multiparticipatory space into a literary text. As such we need to make some images clearer for the reader. Miryam wants to give a sense of “her sounds” in the dialogue that follows. She is a proud Mestiza/Latina, born and raised in Perú. This life-fact, otherwise meaningless, has given her not only a soft but distinct Spanish accented English but also her immigrant status. Please note that her upbringing differs from that of a mainstream US-raised person. Debra would like to give a bit of explanation as well. As a White, middle-class, heterosexual woman living in the United States, English is the only language that Debra speaks. She has never experienced any lack of access or thought of herself as disabled in any way.

Recognition of Otherness

Miryam: Hong Kong was beautiful...it was like I went back into my childhood...
I was inside my fairy tales... my gosh...

Debra: ...remember we were watching soccer in the streets and how great that was? That was when the world cup was going on and...

Miryam: I know, so beautiful and everybody spoke English...

Debra: I know, everybody spoke English and the signs were either in English...

Miryam: or Chinese

Debra: ...so that gave us a lot of access

Miryam: yeah, yeah...

Debra: ...and then once we got to Korea things changed dramatically...

Miryam: yeah, that was very difficult...starting from...

Debra: ...getting off the plane, I remember us both feeling that exactly when we got off the plane...

Miryam: ...and I didn't know where to go, there was no way that we could understand the signs...

Debra: noooooo... the signs were real difficult to make sense of...

Miryam: yeah... and I thought it was because we were tired, we were flying...

Debra: ...it was late when we got in...and then our students drove us into Taejeon

Miryam: ...which was sweet, was sweet...

Debra: ...and then we started teaching the very next day...

Miryam: yeah, boom!

Debra: ...we were right there in the classroom. What was that like for you? Do you remember?

Miryam: It was strange because you know? Here, I am a foreigner and there I was the expert... on the United States...I was "the United States representative" which I would never assume for myself... so that was pretty strange for me and I tried... I tried hard to take off that from me so, I kept explaining, I would say "no I am not white I am Latino" and they are like "hahahaha" and I was... NO! there is no hahahahaha because "I am not from the US, I'm not White, I am Peruvian, I'm a Latina woman in the US!" then... they listened but didn't believe me or didn't

understand what I meant...but at least, after those explanations, I felt my identity start to be... feel a little more like me

Debra: yeah, yeah

Miryam: I don't know what about you?

Debra: well I felt that once I got into the classroom I began immediately using my students as a crutch...

Miryam: oh?

Debra: because I didn't feel abled

Miryam: wow!

Debra: so immediately...

Miryam: "no gogi"

Debra: yeah, because I don't eat meat, I asked my students how do I ask for [food without] meat and they immediately helped me with that. They even wrote down, I still have the list of food they gave me, a whole list of food, and wrote down phonetically how to say the words so that I would be able to order food because they were so concerned I wasn't eating. So I began to use them immediately for directions. Even your students I used in a sense for taking us places for showing us where the market was and so I felt as though I was using them as a crutch in a way that I don't normally depend on people...

Desire for the familiar

Debra: remember when we went to the movies? Oh my god...

Miryam: that was so weird...it was so strange that I felt so rested in a language that is not my own

Debra: yeah

Miryam: that I felt...so it was so...much joy

Debra: Will Smith should have won an Academy Award for Men in Black II and the little dog, also!

Miryam: the dog spoke English, things that I understood easily

Debra: suddenly I felt abled again...

Miryam: ...remember when I started crying at the golf club? That woman was speaking in Spanish...

Debra: ...it was amazing and they were singing...

Miryam: she was singing

Debra: ...and you were singing right along with her and I didn't understand what the song was about but you were so happy!

Miryam: isn't that amazing? the power of the language... I just went back home... I totally forgot where I was...

Editorial Note:

During the workshop, the presenters and the participants shared several moments in which desires for the familiar appeared. In particular, Debra and Miryam revealed a low-point in their journey, the unexpected trip to McDonald's. Initially they shared with disgust then laughter as participants and presenters realized that they had all experienced a similar happening. Questions were raised about the socio-cultural implications of Western influences.

Moments of translation

Debra: How people perceived us at different moments in time was pretty amazing

Miryam: ...remember when I would have to translate for you? I was the mediator for English because I had better English than you? HAHHAHAHA!

Debra: ...that was another way that I felt so out of it because people would talk to you but they would not talk to me.

Miryam: It was horrible!

Debra: It was awful!

Miryam: But it was strange!

Debra: It was like sometimes I wasn't even there!

Miryam: So fascinating because how can I end up having better English? I don't know? I have no clue?

Debra: I felt like a clod.

Miryam: I know...

Debra: ...but what was fascinating was everyday at the very beginning of each of my classes I was able to talk to my students about that.

Miryam: So your students really were your support group?

Debra: They were! I used them in these tremendous ways as a crutch...they were able to help me...talking to them helped me to make sense of it...

Miryam: ...for me it was totally different. To me each day of class was a struggle because the topic of my seminar was race relations from a Latino perspective but, I was assumed as a US-mainstream person...so every time, in every class, everywhere, I had to deal with that...well...but what was funny ... is that, I didn't have an accent!

Debra: No, you did not have an accent!

Miryam: ...and it was "oh my English is perfect, who knows?!?!?" Hahahaha...but that was a cute thing, I don't mind, I didn't mind at all. But it is strange, the struggle, the price of having to be the norm was too hard for me, the price was too high. So I am happy with my accent

Editorial Note:

Debra and Miryam went to Korea as Visiting Professors to teach graduate seminars in a university. And while English was the expected medium of instruction, they were not prepared for the challenges they faced. For example, Miryam and Debra were addressed differently ranging respectively from getting doors opened with pleasure to being silenced by authority figures. During the workshop, these issues were amply discussed and questions were raised with respect to the enactment of culture and gender.

Significance

Miryam's and Debra's objective with this work is multifold in that they want to disturb the accepted definitions of researcher/participant, insider/outsider, first/second language speaker. Numerous variables, overlapping layers, soft meetings and cacophonous voices enter into the river of representations of these encounters. The case they want to build here, with the help of their multiple stories/understandings, is dealing with the challenge of being "the other" while teaching and doing research overseas. Both Miryam and Debra remember from their experience:

Miryam – Otherness is not a new thing for me. I have been considered "different" almost all my life both in my home-country using my native language and definitely, I'm not part of the mainstream group here, in the States. Thus, *Difference* and *Otherness* have been my companions. Yet, I've always endured and learned from it. All of these wonderful resources however, did not prepare me for my Korean experience. There, while teaching a research seminar "*Multiple America's: Race and Ethnicity in the US*" I found myself bouncing back and forth between being an expert and an illiterate. On the one hand, I was able to talk about racial and ethnic inequalities in the US school system both as a researcher and as an individual with an "ethnic" background. On the other hand when the classes ended, the English-haven constructed by my host university ended too. Each day, outside the class, was a learning experience in which communication happened but only to re-affirm that I was not able to read nor speak the normative language. In my case, multilingual literacy is a tool for survival that I was not able to use. Korea taught me a new kind of Otherness, that I could be illiterate regardless of my multilingualism.

Debra—I teach about issues of ability/disability in my secondary teacher education courses as well as my graduate research courses. I talk about these issues as an advocate, as an activist, as a critical thinker, as a researcher. Yet, my experience is limited to the ease with which I move in the world. As a White woman living in the United States I've never experienced any lack of access, for I

am abled. My language is that of the dominant culture. I can hear, see, talk, and walk. I can drive. I never thought of myself as disabled in any way. That is, until I traveled to Korea. I was suddenly transformed into Other: powerless and no longer abled. In Korea I was denied access. I could not read the signs. I could not speak the language. My way of enacting gender was out of place. I was stared at because I did not look like everyone else. I needed to rely on my students to order food, to translate for me, and to take me places. I even had difficulty finding a Western-style toilet that I could use. For the first time I was aware of my Otherness. Suddenly theory became real, my own daily practice—my teaching, my advocacy, my activism, my research—a lived experience.

Their objective however is more complex in that both authors want to disturb the accepted definitions of teacher/learner, insider/outsider, first/second language speaker for classroom teachers and for teacher educators. Specifically their intent is to begin a conversation that addresses the challenge of teaching with/in the globalized classroom in the US.

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