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Transitioning from Italy to the United States: Intercultural learning and living experience of two doctoral students

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ABSTRACT

This cross-border narrative analyzes the intercultural perspectives of two doctoral students, one Chinese and the other Italian, who are international doctoral students conducting research in the United States. The first author is doing a doctorate in education in international adult and higher education, while the second author is undertaking a doctorate in adult and community education. Utilizing reflection rooted in Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning and adopting a collaborative autoethnography framework, the cross-border narrative seeks to draw comparisons between their respective intercultural learning and living experiences. It underscores the interconnectedness of these experiences despite their diverse cultural backgrounds. The reflection contributes to a better understanding of their varied intercultural experiences, leading to the conclusion that self-awareness is the initial step toward improving intercultural competence.

Keywords: experiential learning theory, intercultural experience, international students, multilingual speakers, transition

This cross-border narrative highlights the experiences of two international doctoral students and explores how their intercultural encounters prompt them to look at their personal experiences by using collaborative autoethnography while fostering intercultural competence (IC).

In October 2020, I started my first study abroad degree-seeking program in Italy after more than 25 years of Chinese education, including bachelor's and master's degrees. The new educational environment, the Italian education system, has given me a unique intercultural experience. Fortunately, in September 2022, through the Ulisse Program, I came to the United States as a doctoral student concurrently serving as a visiting scholar at Texas State University to carry out a five-month overseas living and learning period. (First author, she/her/hers)

In 2015 I started my multicultural journey abroad. My passion for international experiences bloomed much earlier with an intercultural short-term high school exchange in France. Speaking the language and culture of Godard initiated my long-lasting passion for other cultures. European Voluntary Service in the Galician land strengthened European belonging, followed by a bachelor's degree in France and a long-term academic path in the United States. (Second author, she/her/hers)

I am an associate Dean for Educational Partnerships and Enrollment and professor of adult, professional, and community education at Texas State University. In this reflection, I guide the two doctoral students in their novice research endeavors as research and writing mentor. My presence in the paper is limited to that and no description of my intercultural experience is featured. (Third author, she/her/hers).

The connection between the first author (a Chinese doctoral student) and the second author (an Italian doctoral student) is recent yet well-established. In October 2022, during an academic conference, we, two international doctoral students in the U.S., crossed paths. After three days of exchange, we discovered that we have a similar research field in international adult education and are attached to the same city, Padua, located in the north of Italy. The first author is pursuing her doctoral degree from the University of Padua, while the second author hails from Padua. Moreover, collective experiences of having a multicultural background and transitioning from Italian to American culture inspired us to share strategies to acclimate to American culture. The third author is a professor of adult, professional, and community education, has conducted research and faculty professional development training for many years in Padua, and is collaborating in this cross-border narrative as a research and writing mentor. The reflection presented in this paper focuses solely on the experiences of the first two authors, with the third author assuming a mentoring role. We are two individuals enhancing our intercultural competence (IC), the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Deardorff, 2006). This reflection aims to accomplish what, why, and how we transitioned to the U.S. through our Italian academic experience informed by our multicultural backgrounds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiencing and navigating multicultural transitions significantly contributes to the development of IC of international students (IS), playing a pivotal role in fostering a deeper understanding and proficiency in diverse cultural settings. We believe IC defined as "the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways" is crucial for intercultural adaptation, given our shared experiences of the challenges and difficulties in adapting to a new environment (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 422). According to Leung et al. (2014), IC is an adaptive capacity based on an inclusive and integrative worldview that enables participants to effectively accommodate the demands of living in a host culture. During their multicultural transitions, IS can establish fresh social connections and engage in intercultural adaptation (Li, 2020), fostering the promotion of their IC development (Hang & Zhang, 2023). Furthermore, the development of IC, identified as one of the crucial benchmarks for success in internationalization (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019), can serve as a catalyst for the internationalization process. IC is one of the most important outcomes of international doctoral students' ability in terms of internationalization of doctoral education (Dailidienė et al., 2013). Notably, previous studies have frequently explored the IC of IS and its constructive impact on their academic and/or sociocultural transitions (Lyubovnikova et al., 2015; Meng et al., 2018). Yet, there is limited research on how transitional intercultural experiences impact the improvement of IS' IC.

Through conference interactions and idea exchanges, we collaborated, by writing together to the foundation for our experiential learning that fostered IC. Experiential learning, according to Kolb (1984), refers to "a holistic process of adaptation to the world" (p. 31). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) continues to be widely recognized as a key framework explaining how individuals acquire knowledge from their experiences (Kayes, 2002; Yuen & Lee, 1994). Drawing on the contributions of Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, James, and Freire, Kolb postulated an integrated model of learning, positing that experiential learning represents the entirety of the human learning process, where experience serves as the foundation for four learning modes: feeling, reflecting, thinking, and acting (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). Arranged sequentially, these four modes constitute a learning cycle divided into four phases. The cycle delineates the progression from immediate concrete experiences (CE), which form the basis for observation and reflection (RO), to the assimilation of experiences into abstract conceptualization (AC). Subsequently, these abstract concepts are implemented into active experimentation (AE) with the world. AE not only concludes the learning cycle but also sets the stage for a new cycle by facilitating the creation of new experiences (CE). ELT underscores the interaction between individuals and their environment, offering a model that elucidates the connection between the person and their surrounding environment (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004).

Expanding upon these concepts, this autoethnography aims to broaden the existing literature by examining how the multicultural learning and living experiences of two international doctoral students influence their IC based on the framework of ELT. There are few studies exploring the enhancement of intercultural competences through shared experiences and collaboration in the realm of internationalizing doctoral education. Thus, understanding how the

transition of intercultural learning and living experiences enhances the IC of two international doctoral students is vital for advancing educational practices, promoting inclusivity, and fostering excellence in doctoral education globally.

METHOD

The study adopted ELT framework to explain how individuals are constantly changing and learning due to the environment, which, in this case, represents a different cultural dimension and context of living (Kolb, 1984). Collaborative autoethnography serves as the tool to examine their experiences in light of ELT to improve their IC. In this collaborative narrative, we used autoethnography to analyze our personal experiences considering our international scholarly connection that brought us to create this piece of work and ultimately to improve our IC through our reflections.

Autoethnography has three main characteristics: use of the researchers' personal experience as the main data, comprehension of a social phenomenon, and result of the reflection in a writing format (Jones et al., 2013). We collected our collaborative narrative data from various sources, including previous reflections, cultural autobiographies, and academic assignments. Data collection resulted from the conjunction of both scholars' interaction and connection. We consistently touched base after meeting for the first time to keep the momentum of our intercultural exchange. We discussed how our individual experiences could nurture one another while raising self-awareness. In other words, we used "interactive interviews" (Ellis et al., 2011) to converse about our shared backgrounds, notwithstanding individual different experiences from Italy to the U.S. Our conversations were enriched by salient moments, referred to as "epiphanies" by Denzin (1989), in our intercultural encounters that were memorable and impactful, influencing our understanding of ourselves and others. The result of the collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013), as already explored, was a comparison that delved into cultural, linguistic, and intercultural similarities and differences. This study is one of the examples of the underutilized collaborative autoethnographies highlighting the counter-narratives of the authors (Hernandez et al., 2015). In this autoethnography, we met through zoom, steadily to collaboratively discuss our reflections. Once all the data was collected, meaning making was created by theme coding. We coded our data through specific themes that became more general as we created more holistic categories (Saldaña, 2009). The ultimate outcome of collaborative autoethnography is a confessional-emotive narrative that delves into personal and social aspects of life, akin to approaches used in other studies (Homan Jones, 2005).

Through the process, we connected and developed a solid friendship. We respectfully listened to each other, constructing meaning collaboratively with open-mindedness to different perspectives shared. Ensuring the integrity of the methodology adopted, we engaged with each other and extensively shared similar impacts of the educational pathway on our international and intercultural academic journeys for confirmability.

EXPERIENCE OF TWO DOCTORAL STUDENTS

ELT emphasizes the importance of experience and its role in the learning process (Kolb, 1984). This reflection explores the respective intercultural learning and living experiences through the lenses of improving IC.

First Author: Everything is New? Stuck between China, Italy, and the U.S.

Concrete Experiences of Cultural, Linguistic, and Educational Contexts

In two months in the U.S., through a surprising allergy, I had no way of diagnosing the source; I suddenly realized that everything is new for me. Firstly, I noticed the comfortable and relaxed natural environment on campus. For instance, a deer or squirrel is everywhere throughout the campus. Moreover, regarding geography and structure, Texas State University (TXST) has a centralized campus in the city, while University of Padova (UNIPD) is integrated throughout the city. Secondly, I noticed abundant software and hardware resources as TXST has a vast and functional library with rich resources. Thirdly, I engaged in different ways of thinking and interacting, I realized language barriers are not the main reason for understanding, but the way of thinking and reacting. Luckily, everyone I met in the U.S. accepted me as a person to be part of the community, both inside and outside the university. Instead, in Italy, I heard discriminatory comments such as "go back to China." American society has been more inclusive. Last, the educational system differs from Italy and China, especially China, specifically in its different types of teaching and learning approaches. The classes include group discussions and interactive activities, and students are free to express thoughts or ask questions at any time, which I was not used to. In addition to this, formal research projects can be conducted only after passing the CITI program (The Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative that certifies training in research ethics and compliance), receiving the certificate, and then submitting the proposal and gaining approval from the university's Institutional Review Board. This requirement is not present in the Chinese or Italian research systems.

Reflective Journey in Assimilating Multilingual and Multicultural Backgrounds

Gaining insights from my intercultural learning encounters and experiences while enhancing my IC is paramount. Understanding the reasons behind my adaptational process to previous unfamiliar environments is a crucial step forward. I can speak Mandarin, Minnan Language, and English, and I know a bit of Cantonese and Italian. Even though I have short-term exchange experiences in English-speaking countries, for instance, Canada and Australia, living in an English-speaking country for five months is more impactful. Language barriers could be a factor influencing intercultural learning and living experiences. However, it is not because I cannot speak English; it is related to cultural barriers

which stop me from adapting to a new environment. Confucianism is part of the required context of exams for primary, secondary, and high school students in China. I spent almost 25 years living and learning in China. A Confucian heritage culture has influenced me and other international Chinese students studying in the U.S. (Heng, 2020; Mao, 2022). Chinese culture has become part of me and influenced my adaptation, directly or indirectly impacting my thinking and behavior.

Fostering IC through Reflective Learning and Experience Creation

The reflective process leads to outcomes in learning (Merriam, 2004) and transforming. There may be several ways to improve the IC:

- learning English by understanding how people think and express themselves
- learning about and respecting the differences between Chinese and Western cultures
- accepting myself as a person, and balancing the sense of gap impacted by other people's expectations

Second Author: Exposure to Different Western Lifestyles between Italy, France, Spain and the U.S.

Experiencing different roles within the educational system

My intercultural learning and living experiences include different cultural systems. I have experienced different cultures that respond to different life phases (Kolb, 1984): strengthening social skills in Spain, pursuing my French passion in France, English language exposure and acknowledgment of diversity issues in the U.S. My intercultural learning broadened while becoming a genuine intercultural liaison for international peer students by helping them adjust to the educational and cultural system. Also, my exchange student eagerness of engaging in all the stimulating activities of an American campus was replaced by a gradual awareness of the place I was living in: majority white, lacking diversity, apparent welcoming midwestern hospitality, and many travel barriers due to limitations in transportation.

Regarding working culture at the academic level, I am often surrounded by skilled practitioners, faculty, and friends, sometimes international, who are absorbed by their academic work. I have gradually learned how a balanced lifestyle works for me. However, I am constantly challenged by others' expectations, and I am drawn into this vortex of thoughts dictating my inadequacy to the fast pace of American life.

Reflective Journey in Assimilating Multilingual and Multicultural Backgrounds

At the beginning of my experience, I was highly concerned by the way I sounded and how I was understood. While taking an accent reduction course, I did not necessarily soften my accent but improved some learned mispronunciation. I soon became aware that the Italian accent is pleasant for others. This privilege is not the same for other international peers of mine. Moreover, the plurality of languages that I am proficient in is one of my highlights of being in a place rather monolingual where even students learning another language hardly reach a good level of mastery.

A cultural difference I experienced is also embedded in the conversational discourse. I summarized this impactful intercultural difference as “radio frequency.” In the university bubble, I usually engage with people from different places with an open-minded perspective. On the other hand, I also experienced interactions with local Midwestern people working in an environment distinct from academia. They infuse their conversation with American humor I am not always familiar with, therefore I have difficulty inserting my voice. I tend to converse more about personal and cultural experiences, and feelings connected with those experiences. This explains why I felt belonging to a different radio frequency I experienced mostly while in the academic setting.

Engaging in new experiences as an international student and educator

Overall, my transformative path has brought me to shed light on the multiple facets of my identity and how to cohesively coordinate each of them through reconstructing different stories or anecdotes with my ideas and beliefs (Bui, 2021). As an international student, I do not face the same freedom in working opportunities as my American peers while studying and post-graduation due to the immigratory student status. The vulnerability of my status strengthens my passion for my academic and professional areas as well as a collective solidarity with other IS. Both my passion and solidarity are different facets of my identity. I am driven to the field of international education because my purpose is to help other IS in the same situation as me. In my case, the phase of cultural shock has been replaced by a steady cultural adaptation when transitioning from my master’s to my doctoral program as I knew my education journey extended in the U.S. Some factors that challenge my cultural adaptation are the lack of diversity in the Midwest part of the U.S. where I live, a limited cultural environment, and an absence of historical architecture surrounding me.

RESULTS OF LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL COMPARISONS

We drew on Kolb’s (1984) ELT to compare our IC learning experiences in our international doctoral study. Kolb (1984) asserts that learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41). According to Kolb’s four-phase ELT model, concrete experience (CE) and abstract conceptualization (AC) are the two dialectically related modes of grasping experience. In comparison, the reflective observation

(RO) and active experimentation phase (AE) are two dialectically related modes of transforming experience (Kolb et al., 2014). This section analyzes the similarities and differences of our intercultural learning and living experience guided by this framework.

Similar Linguistic Experiences

We share some similarities in the context of the different steps developed by Kolb's ELT (1984). In the CE, Action phase, students interested in enhancing their IC are encouraged to try out actions and have new intercultural learning and living experiences. In our case, we are multilingual: the first author speaks Chinese, English, and some Italian, while the second author speaks English, Italian, French, and Spanish. Given all that, we are both transitioning from Italy to the U.S. with the experience of Italian culture.

In AC integration, students are encouraged to integrate the experience (action and result) into existing knowledge schemas and with existing theory. As a result, a new concept can be applied to future experiences. In our case, we have been trying to make meaning out of our cultural experiences and connecting our experiences within the methodological approach of collaborative autoethnography. The essential parts are learning and thinking about how to solve difficulties and challenges and trying to adapt to the new environment.

Considering the third phase, RO, students reflect on their experience from multiple perspectives and consider influencing factors, for instance, the environment, stakeholders, contexts, and outcomes. This reflection involves a conversation between our past and current intercultural learning and living experiences through interactions with our campuses and communities. This process is conducted in the context of our current intercultural learning and living experiences as doctoral students and scholars in the U.S.

For the AE phase, we became friends and working partners, learning from each other with the goal of mutual improvement and the creation of more literature on intercultural competency. We enhance our individual intercultural competencies by collectively exploring the subject after our respective experiences.

Different Cultural Experiences

As two individuals, our shared intercultural learning and living experiences assist us in understanding our differences. When we separately reflect on our experiences, it can be challenging to fully comprehend the other's perspective, even though we share a common background experience in Italy. Yet, our understanding is often limited to surface-level insights, without delving into the deeper nuances behind each other's experiences.

In examining our CE phase, we recognize that our distinct pre-experiences have contributed to the development of our unique personalities. Our cultural backgrounds play a pivotal role in shaping the lens through which we perceive our new intercultural learning and living experiences in the U.S. Firstly, our

nationalities expose us to Eastern and Western cultural influences. Contrasted with the Western values of freedom, individualism, and openness, Eastern culture tends to be more introverted, collectivist, and conservative. Secondly, our diverse geographical locations have contributed to variations in our education and pre-experiences. The first author possesses relatively less knowledge of the U.S. compared to the second author. Additionally, we bring different multilingual backgrounds to our collaboration. The variations in our linguistic expertise serve as the basis for our integration into diverse cultures. Consequently, our expressions differ, influenced by the languages we are proficient in. Achieving mutual understanding involves navigating the diverse linguistic landscape when communicating in English as our *lingua franca*.

In the integration phase of AC, the perspective, manner, and degree of integration vary between us, contingent on the community context and the roles we assume. As a First Gen student and scholar in the U.S., the first author was consciously seeking to understand American and Mexican cultures, delving into how they think, talk, and behave. The first author has redefined her multicultural perspective (Mexican and American), building upon past experiences (Chinese and Italian), and has embraced the new identity of being a visiting scholar. Conversely, for the second author, recognizing the challenges faced by IS, there arose a need for becoming an intercultural liaison between IS and American culture. Through her graduate assistant work, she assumed this role.

For the RO phase, we reflect on our different interactions with the communities we are a part of, enriching our shared connection. On one hand, we've encountered different academic and socio-cultural environments despite both living and learning in the U.S. However, the first author is situated in Texas, which is in the South of the U.S., while the second author is in Indiana, in the North of the U.S. The first author experienced more Mexican American culture in academia while the second author experienced the same culture outside the university environment. On the other hand, our roles in the U.S. differ: the first author is a short-term visiting scholar in the U.S. but a doctoral student in Italy, while the second author is a doctoral student working for the international office at her university.

The last phase of AE is contemplating what and how we will react to potential future experiences. The similarities and some differences enhance our self-understanding; nevertheless, we exhibit distinct responses to our shared encounters. The first author eagerly anticipates more intercultural learning and living experiences to comprehend the world and gain insights. She aspires that these experiences will deepen her understanding of the intercultural journeys of "sojourners" or "internationals." On the other hand, the second author places a higher value on expanding her social network, which aids in her future career development and, most significantly, aligns with her worldview that encourages learning and understanding more about the world. Becoming an intercultural liaison is seen as a pathway to be acknowledged as a more accomplished professional in international education.

CONCLUSION

Intercultural adult education remains a pertinent subject due to the growing mobility of IS and scholars worldwide. The primary obstacle for IS is the cultural difference, yet it doesn't impede our ability to learn and enhance our IC. As highlighted by Bui (2021), intercultural learning is a recurring process that unfolds as students' progress to higher levels of IC. Irrespective of our backgrounds or destinations, it is essential to advance our IC through the intercultural experiences we encounter, striving to integrate multicultural experiences into our understanding and identities.

Above all, as international adult learners, we have both undergone the process of intercultural integration and transformation. Articulating and comprehending our diverse intercultural learning and living experiences through reflection is aiding in the enhancement of our IC. Our reflection intends not only to benefit us but also to assist other IS in introspection and enhancing their IC while navigating life and education abroad. The experience of studying abroad is filled with stress and uncertainty, yet maintaining a positive attitude in the face of intercultural barriers is crucial. Therefore, the initial step towards improving IC is understanding ourselves.

We have both experienced individual growth through the collaborative reflection that elucidates our shared traits and distinctions. By connecting theory to practice through the lens of Kolb's theory and discerning how our experiences shape us, our IC has advanced. The culmination of this progression is evident in our communication and interaction with each other. The creation of this written piece serves as a symbol of our enduring collaboration and reflects our improved selves. This narrative, merging our commonalities and differences, is crafted to be shared with the world and stands as the origin of our scholarly academic collaboration.

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In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools for content creation in the following capacity:

- None
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing
- Some sections, with extensive editing
- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
- Entire work, with extensive editing

This article incorporates content generated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools. The sections where AI tools were employed are [specify sections if applicable]. The use of AI tools complied with ethical standards and guidelines for academic integrity. The final content has been thoroughly reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, and adherence to academic standards. (Please modify this sample acknowledgment text as needed whether you used it or not while writing your manuscript).

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