At the end of the tunnel, I look back and realise: The experience of a Taiwanese student studying in the UK

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The metaphor of pursuing a PhD
The metaphor to describe the process of pursuing a PhD is: someone walking through a tunnel with blinking lights from the far end. The blinking lights roughly show the direction in which one should head. During the journey from one end of the tunnel to the other, there are sometimes companions but mostly one is on one’s own. It is a lonely process. Supervisors and others can guide you, acting like a torch or a spotlight to tell you where the end of the tunnel is and how to get there. However, a person has to experience the journey by him/herself. This metaphor is not only for those who are doing a PhD overseas but also for those who study in their own country. However, doing a degree in another country is more challenging than doing a degree in one’s own country because one is in a very different cultural and social environment and the adaptation to a different culture needs extra effort.

My background
After spending six years studying in the UK higher education sector, I reflect on my experience of doing my PhD in a country far away from my own. Although it can be argued that different individuals have different experiences of working towards a PhD degree, this variety comes from different causes such as personal history, personal mentality and different expectations of life. Therefore, it is better to make my background more explicit from the beginning. I was educated in Taiwan from pre-school up to master’s degree. Before going to London to pursue my PhD, I taught in secondary schools for a couple of years with only one overseas travel experience. At that time, I was clear in my mind about the broader field of my study, media education, which I came across while doing my Masters in Education. I did a search on the literature related to media education and identified one academic, Professor David Buckingham at the Institute of Education, University...
of London, adopting the approach that I was interested in. Therefore, I started to communicate with him via email and prepared a proposal for him to comment on. After getting his approval, I then began an official application to do my doctoral study at the Institute of Education.

With little experience of living overseas and a limited understanding of what life in the UK is like, I decided to start my PhD journey in late August 2002. It was about two months after receiving the acceptance letter from the Institute of Education London. It cannot be denied that this decision was crucial to me because as a result I had to make a lot of changes in my life. I had to resign from a well-paid and stable job in Taiwan and go abroad for my studies. However, as it is said in the business world, 'high risk equals high reward'. My argument is that it may be more rewarding if international students open their minds to appreciate different cultures; they will learn more than fixed knowledge.

There have been some papers and books discussing how to get a PhD (Finn, 2005) or to deal with the relationship with supervisors (Lee, 2008). In this story, I am going to share some of my experiences and thoughts as an international student doing a PhD in the UK. The focus will be on moving from learning knowledge to learning cultures. Although this (inter)-cultural dimension has been explored by some researchers (Gill, 2007; Walsh, 2010), this story will provide an individual experience of the cultural dimensions of the doctoral journey.

**Learning knowledge versus learning cultures**

There are various dimensions of doing a PhD in the field of social science in the UK. However, I would like to focus on one essential dimension: learning British cultures. Based on my experience, I realised that some international students only study for the purpose of getting a degree from a prestigious UK university, which is highly valued in some Asian countries. What they care about is only getting the certificate and going back to their own countries. Based on my experience, some of them are even afraid of using English to communicate with international students from other countries and the local British people. These students tend to ‘group in their national communities’ as Otten (2003, p.14) describes.

However, I cannot agree with this attitude while studying abroad. I use a simple but useful dichotomy—learning knowledge and learning cultures—to refer to two types of international students. ‘Learning knowledge’ students refers to those who just want the degree. ‘Learning cultures’ students refers to those who would love to open their mind and immerse themselves in the British culture.

As an international student, there is more to learn than just acquiring the knowledge and the research culture. I would argue that learning the language, the customs and the cultures in the UK are crucial tasks. These are the most invaluable experiences to me as an international student. Spending years living abroad should not only be for the degree. A lot of insight can be extracted from living in a different cultural environment and appreciating the cultures of the UK. It is especially true for research students in humanities and social sciences. The insights that we get from living in the UK culture will have benefits on the understanding of the origin of theoretical perspectives and the axiology. It is impossible to understand a culture’s values and knowledge without adequate appreciation of the cultural context.
To learn more than knowledge, the first and most important step is to have an open mind. The logic is simple and everyone knows about it: if you refuse to keep your mind open, you will never see the different beauty of the world around you.

The importance of learning culture: some personal experiences

I encountered many international students in the UK during my doctoral studies because for several years I conducted part of the induction day for the pre-sessional course for newcomers from different countries taking place at the Institute of Education. That experience gave me a chance to interact with many international students from various countries. One of my tasks in the induction day was to show the new students around the campus. It took about one hour to show newcomers the neighbourhood and the University’s facilities. During the tours I shared some of my experiences of being an international postgraduate student in the UK. In these sharing sessions I always reminded the incoming students of the importance of being aware of different cultural norms – i.e. there are different ways of doing things in different cultures. I sometimes shared an incident that I witnessed when I was in a bank near the Institute of Education one summer afternoon. The people involved in this incident were studying in the same institution as me. One was a doctoral student who had been in the UK for one year and the other was a master’s student who had just started her pre-sessional language course; both were international students from the same Asian country.

In some Asian countries people can take an aggressive attitude towards bank clerks when they run out of patience. However, it does not work in the UK context because it is the policy of banks to protect their staff from being abused. The doctoral student was trying to help the master’s student get her bank account application done. He took the master’s student to the bank several times but there was always a queue. It was not good timing because it was the beginning of a new semester. Many international students were applying for a bank account. The doctoral student shouted at one of the bank clerks and requested to meet the manager of that branch. He required the bank manager to handle the application directly because he was tired of waiting. Apparently, his attitude was not very good. It might work in some Asian countries but not in the UK. They were, consequently, asked to leave the bank because his attitude was viewed as a kind of abuse towards the clerk. The master’s student did not know much about the customs and the cultural norms. Her application, of course, did not make any progress and she felt quite frustrated. As I indicated above, certain ways of communicating with bank clerks may work in some cultural contexts but not in others. However, the international doctoral student did not realize the cultural differences and gave the wrong kind of help.

My intercultural experience and my anxiety

The cultures in western universities are different from, at least, Taiwanese universities. I spent more than a year getting used to the learning styles in UK higher education. I found that the exchange of experiences between international doctoral students
extremely helpful. From the dialogue with my classmates on the doctoral training programme and some senior and more experienced doctoral students, I learned about different angles and interpretation of the supervising styles of my supervisors. Meanwhile, other international students from various countries also provided emotional support. During my six years of reading for my doctoral degree, this kind of dialogue comforted me many times when I felt upset and lost the power to move forward.

Many local doctoral students were studying part-time. As a result, I ended up interacting more with international students from other countries because it was not easy to find British doctoral students and I did not want to spend most of my time speaking Mandarin with my fellow Taiwanese doctoral students. The major reason for making this choice was to give me more opportunities to communicate with others in English. Other international students were often not native speakers however, but I could listen to and understand different accents. It was a good way to force myself to be familiar with various types of English. Meanwhile, I learned about their own cultures through my interactions with them. This was a very good intercultural experience. However, is it impossible to make some local friends and to get some flavour of British culture?

Some strategies for learning culture

After three or four months studying at the Institute of Education, I gradually came to understand British English. However, I still could not follow conversations where I did not have the contextual knowledge I needed. To improve my understanding, I adopted several strategies:

1. Watching local television programmes and listening to BBC radio: I found these to be very good sources of learning British English and culture. I watched BBC news, football news, the Apprentice, Top Gear, Dragon's Den and other programmes. The more I knew, the better I could contribute to conversation with others.

2. Making good use of my supervisors: my two supervisors were my best tutors not only in learning disciplinary knowledge but also in acquiring some in-depth understanding of British culture. I asked them lots of questions and they mostly gave me very useful insights into British culture.

3. Taking part in various seminars and lectures: this is a good way of having more interaction with students, academics and professionals. Frequently, seminar participants found a local pub to continue their discussions. I found the pub experience to be one of the most authentic social activities in the UK.
However, I also wanted to know about British culture outside the university. The issue was how I could have access. Here are two of the strategies I tried:

- Joining HostUK (www.hostuk.org.uk). This was a very good way of expanding my intercultural experience beyond the university. Staying with local people offers a great opportunity to learn about the local culture. Moreover, the host would expect you to share some of your own culture with them. It is really an intercultural exchange process.

- Finding a language exchange partner; this is a common but effective strategy. It is crucial to point out that having a language exchange partner does not mean that the intercultural experience will take place automatically. I had three different language exchange partners while studying in London. Only one of them offered better cultural insights. However, having one is good enough to learn about the culture.

Conclusions – at the end of the tunnel
At the end of the tunnel, I look back at my journey of doing my doctorate in the UK. In terms of academic learning, I have been alone for most of the time. It is really like walking through a tunnel. However, my cultural journey added a lot of fun and colourful memories to my six years living in the UK. When I put my studies aside and moved to the world outside the tunnel, I saw so many things and learned so much. For example, I travelled across the UK and tried various local foods in different areas. To a large extent, it was the rich cultural experience that helped me reduce some of the depression of working towards my PhD. To me, the importance of the intercultural experience is equal to what I have learned from reading for my PhD.

Author Details
Tzu-Bin Lin is from Taiwan. He received his doctorate from the Institute of Education, University of London in 2008. Then, he worked for Bournemouth University, UK. He is now an assistant professor in the Policy and Leadership Studies (PLS) Academic Group at the National Institute of Education (NIE) Singapore.

References:


