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Cross-Cultural Contexts of Teaching and Learning: Experiences of International Faculty at a Southeastern University in the United States

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Abstract

International faculty are an integral part of higher education and institutions worldwide. Their presence on campus allows institutional members to experience diverse backgrounds and talents. However, despite growing evidence that their presence is critical to institutional missions as well as student success, international faculty face significant challenges in their teaching practice. Being an international faculty member, specifically in the United States, requires constant negotiation of one's cultural and social identities while attempting to adapt to local mores and expectations of teaching and learning. In this qualitative study, members of an international faculty learning community present narratives of their teaching experiences at a university in the Southeastern region of the United States. These experiences demonstrate how seven international faculty members with cultural identities rooted in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe have created a "third space" to bridge their cultural identities with their institution's social expectations of teaching and learning.

Keywords:

International faculty, cultural identities, third space, teaching, learning.

Institutions of higher education in the United States (U.S.) have traditionally benefited from international faculty, yet very little has been written about how they "navigate the cross-cultural context of teaching and learning," (Achankeng, 2016, p. 155) and the challenges they encounter as a result of pedagogical and culture shock (Hutchison, 2016). International faculty bring rich perspectives and experiences that enhance the learning environment for students and institutional goals and stature (GuramatunhuCooper & Rodriguez, 2018). Even though they have an increasing presence in institutions of higher education throughout the U.S., international faculty face challenges due to the tension between their cultural orientations and the expectations of institutions, students, and colleagues.

Omiteru et al. (2018) defined international faculty as "the broad range of professional university teaching scholars who were born in a different country, received their K-12 education abroad and their higher education degrees in the United States, and are of non-native English speaker status" (p. 1). Influenced by this framing, our work defines international faculty as individuals whose origins, personal identities, worldviews, and

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lived experiences are actively or intimately connected to geographical spaces outside of the U.S. This definition allows for differences in citizenship status, language dexterity, and notions of home. We make a distinction between U.S.-born multicultural faculty and foreign-born international faculty due to different dispositions in terms of social behavior, public perception, and cultural backgrounds that can impact their roles in U.S. institutions (Kim et al., 2011). Further, our definition was influenced by how human resources data are collected and previous faculty-led initiatives at our institution.

Since the increase of 21st-century internationalization efforts in higher education, there has been an oft-repeated narrative across U.S. campuses about the need to situate post-secondary learning within a global context that prioritizes cultural diversity (GuramatunhuCooper & Rodriguez, 2018). However, the vital role international faculty play in preparing students for this interconnected, interdependent, and diverse world has been understudied. There is a disconnect between teaching within an educational space that lauds cultural diversity from learners (notably international students) but does not consistently recognize and support the cultural diversity of educators (GuramatunhuCooper & Rodriguez, 2018). While there is a resurgence of scholarship on democratic classrooms or shared power in the classroom between educators and learners (Kesici, 2008), international faculty must first prove themselves to be worthy of having power in the classroom as they work to assuage the curiosity and suspicion of being the “other” because of differences embodied through ethnicity, language, and citizenship (Robbins et al., 2011).

Our study explores how we, as international faculty at an institution in the Southeastern region of the U.S., navigate cross-cultural teaching and learning contexts using the concept of third space (Bhabha, 1994). This leads to the central research question: how do international faculty engage the concept of third space to navigate cross-cultural teaching contexts? In this study, we use autoethnography to give voice to our experiences as international faculty. While it is our hope this work will resonate with fellow international faculty, we write with a specific audience in mind: faculty colleagues and administrators who are tasked with evaluating and assessing the teaching effectiveness of international faculty. We assert that the current assessment of

teaching effectiveness neglects acknowledgment and understanding of the characteristics of the instructor while focusing on other situational factors such as characteristics of the learner, the expectations of external groups, the context of teaching and learning, and the nature of the subject (Fink, 2013). In this study, we center the characteristics of the instructor by examining the teaching experiences of international faculty, thus filling a gap in institutional practices and scholarship.

We begin by setting the context and genesis of our work via the formation of an international faculty learning community. This necessary step sheds light on the need for our work. We situate teaching and learning as cultural practices, and present the concept of third space as a meaning-making tool to explore international faculty teaching experiences in the U.S. Using autoethnography, we practice agency by naming our cultural mental models related to teaching and learning and how they impact our practice. Lastly, we end by exhorting institutions and our colleagues to invest in creating support structures to help ease the burden international faculty often quietly carry.

Situational Context

Like other institutions in the U.S., our institution, a large R-2 metropolitan-adjacent public university in the Southeastern region of the U.S., formalized its commitment to global engagement through a five-year Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). Through various partnerships, events, curricular innovations, and education abroad opportunities, our institution signaled an investment in global reach and impact. What was missing was the recognition of international faculty and their role in campus internationalization. Our Faculty Learning Community (FLC) was a way to “call out” the institution for lack of formal recognition and support of international faculty since ad hoc and isolated initiatives had begun in 2007 (Robbins, 2011, p. viii). The most urgent need for support was to provide teaching and learning resources since this is a significant part of a favorable evaluation in annual reviews and promotion and tenure.

Our FLC was sponsored by our institution’s Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). An institutional FLC convenes seven participants to “learn about a particular topic of interest and to create

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a product to share with the campus community” (Kennesaw State University Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, 2019). Our FLC goals were to examine: a) how the cultural orientation of international faculty impacts their teaching in higher education in the U.S., b) how international faculty have successfully negotiated cultural differences between themselves and their students, and c) ways in which our institution could provide and formalize support for its international faculty. Our FLC was composed of seven faculty members whose cultural identities and origins are rooted in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe. Our academic disciplines were equally diverse, inclusive of humanities, social sciences, mathematics, social work, and human-computer interaction design. Each faculty member had spent significant time living and learning in the U.S., thus having a strong understanding of education traditions in different parts of the country and the world.

The FLC anchoring text: *Experiences of Immigrant Professors: Cross-Cultural Differences, Challenges, and Lessons for Success* (Hutchison, 2016), provided a guide for us to discuss our experiences as international faculty and how we negotiated our identities in the classroom. In discussing our classroom experiences, we found relief in knowing that there are commonalities among international faculty such as continuously determining how to emphasize or minimize our cultural identities in the classroom. Because we occupy dual roles as researchers and participants, we will discuss our faculty learning community in the methodology section in greater detail.

Teaching and Learning as Cultural

The statement that “one should or will be good at teaching if one knows one’s discipline” (Lee et al., 2017, p. 8), fails to take into account the social and cultural aspects of teaching that influence how individual identities engage within the classroom. Hutchison (2016) noted that teaching and learning involve “cultural differences and different worldviews” that create “multiple realities” for educators and learners (p. 8). In framing teaching and learning as culturally grounded phenomena, the performance and practice of the aforementioned interrogate “institutional norms of teaching, learning, disciplinary thinking, and assessment” (Stigler & Hiebert 1999, p. 13) because each educator’s positionality represents particular socialization about the teaching

relationship and general views towards education. Ting-Toomey (1999) noted that a person’s identity is layered, complicated, and shifts depending on social context. One’s identity is a “socio-cultural conditioning process, individual lived experiences, and the repeated intergroup and interpersonal interaction experiences” (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 418). Our identities are a part of how we engage in the practice of teaching.

Day et al. (2006) reaffirmed this by noting the inextricable link between professional and personal identities. We understand this to mean that our life experiences influence the way we teach and see “self, subject matter, or other participants in light of [our] respective identity/ethnicity” (Lee et al., 2017, p. 14). The process of constructing our professional and personal identities is ongoing and, arguably, never completed. It begs the question of whether “once we choose... to adopt another country as home, do we ever stop the process of becoming?” (Boyd, 2011, as cited in Robbins et al., 2011, p. 157.) This process of becoming is complicated by double consciousness (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2015). The new self (of the faculty member) taking root in the U.S. higher education system questions the old self’s identity constructed in the country and/or culture of origin, though the process is not the same for all international faculty and depends on their specific situational context.

Conceptual Framework

To locate our experiences as international faculty, we use Bhabha’s (1994) concept of third space. It is important to note that the third space (also referred to as hybridity) is situated within the context of post-colonial discourse and it has been used in various disciplinary spaces. While there is room (and need) to discuss the intersection of post-colonialism and higher education, our work uses the concept of third space to understand teaching experiences. We frame the third space as an intellectual, ideological, emotional, and physical place that recognizes the cultural contexts in which behaviors and actions are embedded (GuramatunhuCooper & Rodriguez, 2018).

Our work is an example of cross-disciplinary application, which Saudelli (2012) resourcefully referred to as “a nuancing of third space theory” (p. 112). Wang (2007, as cited in Saudelli, 2012) discussed the third space as “a space wherein a person discovers a sense of

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symmetry between what may be seemingly oppositional forces, ideologies, or thought processes” (p. 103). Sterrett (2015) defined the third space as negotiation and translation between two cultural contexts to create a new way of operating that reframes the oppositional as complementary. These two definitions underscore our adopted conceptualization that “the underlying principle or purpose of third space is not to infer consensus” (Saudelli, 2012, p. 103). In our teaching context, the third space is an international faculty-led creation wherein faculty, realizing the existence of two or more cultures in the learning space, identify and perform overt and subtle acculturation or assimilation. This does not always mean that the other party (e.g., students, colleagues, and administrators) are equal partners in creating “symmetry” (Wang, 2007, as cited in Saudelli, 2012, p. 103).

In teaching and learning, a third space can be an intellectual and physical space that ideally bridges experiences and identities between the teacher and student (Smith & Bley, 2013). The call is not for either party to relegate their cultural identities and influences. Rather, the invitation is for both parties to name and claim such influences, with a commitment to understanding behaviors and approaches within their cultural context. In the “interstices” (Kramsch, 1993, as cited in Smith & Bley, 2013, p. 146) between one’s own and another’s culture, participants variously experience outsider/insider or majority/minority perspectives, increase awareness and understanding, and even (re)negotiate roles and rules as they advance their knowledge, skills, and dispositions toward a mindset of “intercultural citizenship” (Byram, 2008, as cited in Smith and Bley, 2013, p. 147). In working with the concept of the third space, we denote the realm of the first space as our individual cultural and social identities and the second space as the domain of the cultural norms of student-teacher relationships in the U.S. We identify the third space as our current individual teaching practices. This third space is informed by the interplay between self, others, and context. While we give a conceptual definition of third space, we each have significant lived experiences as immigrants in the U.S. Outside of our work as educators, we have each experienced a type of third space by navigating new lives outside our countries of birth as bicultural and multilingual individuals.

Methodology

Grounded in qualitative research, our work uses autoethnography to articulate how our identities and experiences as international faculty are “interpreted, understood, experienced, produced, or constituted” (Mason, 2005, p. 3). Because our “multi-layered and textured experiences” (Mason, 2005, p. 3) are the central focus of our work, our meaning-making is best captured through a qualitative approach. Specifically, we employ an autoethnographic approach to highlight “. . . authorial self-revelation, multivoicedness, and personal narrative. . .” (Lather, 2009, p. 20). In autoethnography, the researcher is both the “author and focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed, the creator and the created” (Ellis, 2009, p. 13).

Wall (2008) defined autoethnography as “giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding” (p. 39). Sparkes (2000) offered an expanded definition, presenting autoethnography as “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (p. 21). By using this approach, we create and claim an opportunity for agency, representation, and intersection as international faculty. We echo the conviction that there is increased recognition of self-study research (Han, 2016), standpoint epistemology (Harding, 2006, as cited in Robbins et. al., 2011), and collaborative authorship (Liao & Maddamsetti, 2019; Robbins et. al., 2011). Borrowing from Mazzei’s (2009) discussion on the concept of participant and researcher voice in qualitative research, our work seeks to “elucidate, clarify, confirm, and pronounce meaning” (p. 47) of our teaching experiences as international faculty.

Because our work relies on personal narratives, it produces a multiplicity of truths (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Locating the value of narratives, Webster and Mertova (2007) opined that the “real test of the validity of any research should ultimately be done by those who read it and they should be the ones to decide on whether an account is ‘believable’” (p. 92). To a reader who either seeks to understand or shares the nuances and complexity of the experiences of international faculty, a “story sounds true because either it reminds the reader

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about something that has happened to him/her or it opens a new window to the reader, thereby gaining new understanding” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 99).

We must note that using an autoethnographic approach does present some limitations. Wall (2008) pointed to concerns with objectivity and representation. As a qualitative research approach, autoethnography offers more “interpretive, experimental, critical, and personal forms of writing” (Wall, 2008, p. 41). This means that objectivity, reimagined as validity in the positivist tradition, can be challenging. However, postmodernists such as Bochner (2000) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) give us grace by asserting that research, as a matter of process, is indeed guided by the researcher’s positionality and social location.

Setting and Participants

The choice to engage in autoethnographic research allows us to occupy dual roles of researchers and participants. Our work together began after the formation of a seven-member faculty learning community (FLC) sponsored by our institution’s Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). Our learning community was composed of pre-and post-tenure full-time faculty members within a range of disciplines from humanities, social sciences, mathematics, social work, and human-computer interaction design. With cultural and social identities linked to lived experiences and origins in countries in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe, learning community members shared the experience of completing part of their higher education in the U.S. and having lived in various parts of the country for a significant number of years before serving as faculty at our institution. The two coordinators of the FLC put out a university-wide call to fill five additional slots. The first five to respond (and one of the two coordinators) all happened to be from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The composition of our FLC likely reflects the institutional (and broader academic) context in which qualitative research, and specifically autoethnographic research, is not ubiquitously accepted yet in the U.S. academy. Our colleagues in STEM fields might not have had the luxury of expending time to engage in this faculty learning community when discipline-specific research and service exigencies compete for their attention in the promotion and tenure process.

In calling attention to the ethics of employing autoethnography, Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) noted that researchers “should be cognizant of the ways others are portrayed in their stories and how the researcher’s representation of someone else may impact them socially or personally” (p. 64). Recognizing how power and social identities intersect in the academy, we have chosen not to reveal ourselves beyond cursory information. As international faculty with mixed tenure status, we often feel compelled to strike a delicate balance between pursuing intellectual curiosity and the precarious social currency one might have within the institution when stepping into advocacy.

Data Collection

An appealing part of qualitative research is the variety of data (Creswell, 2007). Data may come from observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials (Mason, 2005). Occupying the dual role of researchers and participants, our data source was our FLC and our data generation method was written narratives by FLC members. Our monthly meetings used guided discussions based on assigned readings of our anchoring text. Although no formal data were collected during meetings, guided discussions formed the basis of our inquiry. Using written narratives as our data generation method allowed us to practice and demonstrate agency in creating and recounting our experiences as international faculty (Mason, 2005). Each FLC member responded to four questions that emerged from our anchoring text and guided discussions:

1. How is higher education (teaching and learning included) viewed in your cultural context?
2. How does your culture show up in your teaching practice and how do students respond to it?
3. What challenges or tensions have you encountered and negotiated?
4. How have you created a third space in your teaching practice?

Themes and Analysis

Responses to the open-ended questions were recorded, scanned, and highlighted for significant statements,

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quotes, or phrases that provided a meaningful understanding of participant experiences as international faculty (Moustakas, 1994). Descriptive coding was used to allow us to “make sense of how things are said and described” (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 118). This included looking for tacit assumptions, explicating actions, and meanings, and crystallizing the significance of the points (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Relying on our conceptual framework of the third space, we identified three main themes: 1) opposition: differences between the first and second space, 2) challenges and tension between the first and second space, and 3) hybridity: establishing a third space. In presenting our themes, we have chosen to employ a format that allows us ownership and agency in how our experiences are relayed (Mazzei, 2016). In some sections, we have displayed full quotes to show the breadth, depth, and meaning of a particular experience that would otherwise be lost in summary.

Opposition: Differences Between the First and Second Space

Perspectives on Education

Our narratives demonstrated an ongoing and explicit exhortation of education as important, necessary, and valuable as seen in the responses to the following prompts: 1) How is higher education (teaching and learning included) viewed in your cultural context? and 2) How does your culture show up in your teaching practice and how do students respond to it? Participant G shared: “Higher education was viewed as a path to success. There was no success in life if it did not come through hard work and dedication.” This comment was echoed by Participant F who asserted: “Within the context of my culture of origin, higher education was viewed as mandatory for members of all social strata.” Participant B stressed the need for an individual’s pursuit of high performance in higher education: “There is a strong emphasis on formal education and high performance in said arena. Education is seen as a necessity, not an option. It determines how far one goes in life.” This worldview is complemented by Participant C’s focus on access to higher education in the culture of origin:

Education is regarded as a valuable asset. It has been established that pursuing higher education can help an individual climb the ladder of success.

Socio-economic status and standard of living can only be improved through education, and that is the main reason tertiary education (or higher education) is free in my native country.

The participant narratives revealed an unwavering belief in the importance of education and how educators are viewed. Descriptions of teachers’ social status in the participants’ cultures of origin suggest reverence and even deference as highlighted in Participant E’s reflection:

[Teaching] is an esteemed profession and one of a high calling. [Teachers] are elders who have founts of knowledge who can shape and mold the spirit and society. I have found myself being called to the role of teacher/educator. My life’s mission has been to ‘equip the equippers.’ I aim to supply and train individuals with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics that will allow them to do their work with excellence.

Participant E’s comments were echoed by Participant B and Participant G presented below:

... teachers were seen as keepers of society, charged with preparing members of the community for a productive life.... Teachers were to be given respect and maintained their identities as teachers, even outside the class. In school, we were expected to stand when a teacher entered the room and being asked to run errands for or by a teacher was a thing to brag about on the playground.

My [redacted] heritage reveres teachers highly. They are respected, valued, and highly praised; however, the pedagogical culture is very traditionalist. The ‘sage on the stage’ embodied my experiences both as a student and as a beginning instructor.

Participant B and Participant G’s responses reveal a fervent belief in an educator’s almost exalted role in society with the responsibility “to shape and mold the spirit and society,” and imbue learners with “knowledge, skills, and abilities” to prepare them for society. Understanding these social and cultural influences reveals a sense of purpose and meaning that one brings to the classroom as a faculty member (Rendón, 2009). The difficulty is translating these perspectives on education into our new

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cultural space in the U.S. While our backgrounds might have dictated a collectivist or national sense of the value of education, the diversity of the U.S. makes it such that education is prioritized differently across the country, and maybe dissimilar to our respective mental models. As participant reflections show, education in other parts of the world is viewed as a necessity for social and financial success. Formal education in the U.S. can be a part of one's life story: a choice among other options to pursue. This juxtaposition of necessity and option can create tensions in the classroom, wherein international faculty are operating from a sense of urgency of education as crucial to success while social narratives in the U.S. make room for non-formal paths to social and financial success (Kempner & Makino, 2006). This understanding of education's value also leads to tensions and challenges in framing the role of the educator and their expected relationship with students.

Hierarchy in Student-Teacher Relationships

We began by framing perspectives of education shared in our FLC. These perspectives set the tone for how we perform the role of teacher and educator, and how students respond to this performance. As Participant D noted, “educators still command a level of respect ... I value and respect this hierarchy of influence and power.” Participant F remarked,

[In my culture of origin], instructors' performance tended not to undergo significant scrutiny, and students were encouraged to take responsibility for their learning process . . . Grade negotiations or disputes constituted an almost [non-existent] practice. At the same time, students were not invited to evaluate their professor's performance . . . Unsurprisingly for such a rigid academic environment, student-teacher interactions dictated formality and limited contact . . . At the initial stage of my teaching practice in the United States, I aspired to foster a professional instructor-student dynamic without significant emotional or social connection. Such an approach shaped students' perception of me as tense, unfriendly, and inflexible.

Juxtaposed to the culture of formal and hierarchical student-teacher relationships in our countries of origin

is the U.S. pedagogical culture in which students can challenge an instructor's grade or performance. As Participant D explained:

I expected the rules that govern respect for teachers that I grew up with to be given to me. However, that was not the case. For example, the teacher-student relationship is not that of a ‘sage on the stage.’ American students questioned how, what, and when I graded. If they were not satisfied with their grade, there was a constant need to justify and explain grades to [my student and department chair]. I once spent four hours collecting documentation on one student to show that I had given adequate time, help, and consideration when the student complained about their final course grade.

Participant F's observation of students' perceptions of their instructor persona as “tense, unfriendly, and inflexible” contrasts with a worldview wherein student-teacher relationships can be less formal (e.g., on a first-name basis by some). Participant B eschewed this particular worldview as creating “a false sense of intimacy,” and breaching social boundaries that are to be upheld even after graduation: “To this day, I address anyone who has ever taught me formally.” FLC participant narratives affirm the belief in a “hierarchy of influence and power between educators and students.” Overall, participant narratives suggest a tension between cultures of origin that largely preclude students from having a low-power distance relationship with their teachers (Hofstede et al., 2010) and U.S. pedagogical culture in which the power differential between teacher and student is flattened.

Tensions and Challenges Between the First and Second Space

Language Expression in American English

In response to the third prompt: “What challenges or tensions have you encountered and negotiated?”, the participant narratives detail other tensions and challenges that arise as international faculty negotiate the issue of language and communication. Participant C recognized the potential detriment in “direct” communication, especially when critiquing students'

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work, and acknowledged the need for and expectation by students that any criticism is balanced by some praise.

I have learned that being too direct, which is a cultural way of communicating for me, is not the best strategy to choose during class critiques. In the U.S., students often respond well to words of praise, but do not respond well to criticism. I have learned as an educator that in addition to pointing out areas of improvement in student work, I must also be sure to find areas in the assignment that are worth praising. The irony is that at times there is nothing noteworthy to praise in a student's work (for example, the writing indicates a clear lack of engagement), yet the instructor is supposed to say something positive.

Participant E reported on the differences in register that occasionally confuse learners who are unfamiliar with English words that are “not common, colloquial, or quotidian to the ‘native ear.’” The comment rounds out with the participant's confusion, being “dumbfounded” when learners ask for clarification “when I am speaking in plain English.” Participants B and D disclosed deliberate actions in response to language and culture challenges.

According to Participant B:

I made a very intentional choice when I started my academic career: to adopt an American accent. Even though I am a native English speaker, my accented speech meant that I often had to repeat myself. My accent in my personal life is very different from the one I use in my professional life. Although, sometimes when I am tired, my actual accent comes out and my students are always surprised. When I first started at [redacted] I remember that my classes would always fill up last in my department. It bothered me a lot. I decided to ask some students and they told me that my name suggested that I did not speak English, and some did not want to take a class with a professor who ‘did not speak English.’ Since then, I have been satisfied with my choice to adopt an American accent at work and minimize a sense of being the ‘other.’

Participant D acknowledged feeling uncomfortable

with students laughing at unfamiliar terms that stem from the instructor's culture of origin. Revealing a self-reflective learning curve developed over several years, Participant D “normalized” the perceived communication barriers with transparent disclosure: “I would begin my semester with informing my students that I would occasionally use [redacted] words, and I would be happy to translate if they asked me.” The use of language, accompanying accents, and communication styles may present a point of tension that requires international faculty to be comfortable with code-switching, which represents an individual's location in and relationship with two or more languages (Hughes et al., 2006). The participant narratives demonstrate a level of self-awareness necessary to initiate and maintain code-switching.

Hybridity: Establishing a Third Space

Lastly, responses to the prompt “How have you created a third space in your teaching practice?” reveal self-reflection, analysis, and compromise to reach students and reduce affective filters on the student-teacher relationship. Participant F identified adjustments prompted by affective and cognitive considerations.

As a result of continuous observation, reflection, and professional development, I started adapting my teaching practice to the needs of my students from vast backgrounds. At the same time, raising a child in the United States allowed me to be more in touch with its popular culture. As my child became closer in age to my students, I could recognize similar challenges and behaviors and would start reaching out to my students to offer help and support. In all my classes, I make an effort to get to know my students early in the semester, learn to recognize their challenges, and modify my teaching style accordingly. In structuring my courses, I strive to create communities to minimize the intimidation of communicating in a foreign language and position myself as a facilitator of the learning process. As a strong opponent of rewarding mediocrity, I still encourage high standards for my students' performance and maintain a rigorous curriculum and grading philosophy. At the same time, I learned to diversify my assessment methods, focus on the process of assignment completion, and evaluate my students' progress from a more

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global perspective, turning each assessment into an opportunity to empower them.

Participant C highlighted strategic negotiation that takes place beyond the classroom in the relationship between international faculty and the institution's expectations of teaching and learning:

A third space has been created by assimilating to the ideals of the host working environment. In the quest for a successful career in teaching, careful steps have been taken to subtly adopt new strategies and teaching techniques acquired through the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning while maintaining continual pedagogical conversations with senior colleagues and my academic mentor

Participant A noted adjustments based on observations of broader U.S. culture in comparison to their country of origin.

In my teaching practice, I learned very quickly that there are things you must give up and others that you could keep to keep your standards and ethics. . . I learned quickly that students want to be informal with their instructors. I had to accept that they will never be able to say my name, so I settled for Dr. plus first name. That was ok. I also had to accept how casually American students dressed to come to class. However, I have learned that [redacted] students also dress much more casually now. . . That is what I would call my third space.

Participant B noted a positive change in classroom dynamics when they shared details about their cultural identity as a way of making their third space visible to students.

I noticed a change in my relationship with my students and in my course evaluations when I started to share my cultural identity and influences as they relate to my perspectives on education and teaching persona. I explained that I would do and say some things that were grounded in my cultural identity, and I wanted them to be able to recognize this. I also invited them to lean into their own cultural identities so that everyone could feel free

to bring their whole selves into the classroom and not feel bound to expectations of performance. Revealing myself to my students in this way has helped to establish a connection that reflects an appreciation of cultural differences.

Participant D echoed the same sentiment, noting “My third space in my teaching practice is the intersection of my sociocultural identity, my heritage, and my students. . . who I am and where I am from is as important as where they are from and who they are.” As Participant E noted, by allowing themselves to be “seen” as “whole selves,” as “human” with “faults and virtues,” they sought to create a space that allows for “deeper [and] more vulnerable interactions with one another” as a classroom community of life-long learners, which includes the instructor. Participant G aptly speaks to this,

I try to foster the idea that every classroom is the site for a third space in which students' buy-in is generated as we co-create the course experience and collaboratively decide, for example, which texts we examine and how learners document the attainment of learning outcomes. In the third space class, we variously assume the roles of learners and experts (or audience-participants and instructor-facilitator). Whether anchored at [institution redacted] in a classroom or facilitated as faculty-led group travel . . . the combination of instructor and learners from two cultures makes for a powerful lesson in intercultural awareness and competence development. The inclusion of ‘other’ individuals generates unforeseen questions and approaches and quickly lays bare one's persona, professional, and academic ‘blind spots.’ Having to negotiate differences in a course-long experience requires not only the willingness to learn, understand, and empathize, but also to compromise, suspend judgment, and develop thoughtful analysis.

While all participant narratives highlight relational aspects and willingness to learn and grow, the language used points to institutional power dynamics and intrapersonal struggle: phrases like “you must,” “I had to,” and “I settled” speak to both concessions and compromise given greater exigencies. For example, Participant C noted the process of “assimilating to

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ideals of the host working environment” suggesting asymmetry in the pursuit of a third space. Participant narratives demonstrate the conflict between staying true to one’s standards and meeting perceived expectations in the U.S. Consequently, the experiences outlined above reveal that international faculty create a third space by adjusting their practices, letting go of some previously held conventions, and adopting new approaches.

Discussion

Stretching Bhabha’s (1994) conception of third space, we view it as an intellectual, ideological, emotional, and physical place where one recognizes the cultural contexts in which behaviors and actions are embedded and how they can enrich the learning environment when new expectations and norms that honor different cultural experiences are created (GuramatunhuCooper & Rodriguez, 2018). In the realm of teaching, a third space becomes an intellectual and physical space that bridges experiences and identities for and between the teacher and student (Smith & Bley, 2013). The call is not for either party to relegate their cultural identities and influences. Rather, the invitation is for both parties to name and claim such influences, with a commitment to understanding behaviors and approaches within their cultural context rather than assigning judgment. In this way, the sense of “other” as exotic or strange is diminished and neither hero nor villain need exist.

Our themes: 1) opposition: differences in the first and second space, 2) tensions and challenges between the first and second space, and 3) hybridity: establishing a third space, demonstrate the personal and professional complexity that can be part of the international faculty experience. This complexity is a manifestation of “cultural differences and worldviews” that create “multiple realities” in shared learning spaces (Hutchison, 2016, p. 8). In the various cultures of the FLC participants, teachers play an important role in society and are afforded a level of deference that denotes their social status and enjoy a low-power distance relationship with their students (Hofstede et al., 2010). As Participant D noted, “educators still command a level of respect. . . I value and respect this hierarchy of influence and power.” When playing into a binary categorization of teaching approaches, our FLC narratives demonstrate socialization within traditionalist or “teacher-centered” approaches

to education (Serbessa, 2006). This teacher-centered approach is intimately connected to how educators are viewed and elevated in cultures of origin; however, it appears to be in tension with the emphasis on learner-centered approaches prevalent in the U.S. The key here is to view the approaches as entities existing in the same space rather than one as superior to the other (Sterrett, 2015). Serbessa (2006) eased this tension by framing both approaches as facilitation of learning depending on the content knowledge and developmental level of the students. Our FLC participants represent fields where one must have clear expertise (for example, teaching a foreign language or in fields that require licensure) and these contexts will determine the utility and effectiveness of teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches.

Other tensions and challenges arise in the classroom as international faculty face the issue of language and communication. As Spector and Lederman (1990) discussed, “gender, age, class, and ethnicity are key markers of vulnerability for immigrants” (p. 247). For our work, the use of language, accompanying accents, and communication styles may present a point of intra and interpersonal conflict that requires international faculty to choose between assimilation or acculturation through speech patterns. FLC participant narratives demonstrate competency in code-switching, which is an individual’s location in and relationship with two or more languages (Hughes et al., 2006). The experience of “being too direct,” “translating in my head,” choosing to “adopt an American accent at work,” and having to “relearn how to speak English,” detail a level of cognitive and emotional labor that is difficult to explain to colleagues and students.

Participant E’s use of the phrase “speaking of myself as two persons” is a close approximation of this tussling with language one experiences in code-switching by “[living] between worlds” through words (Santini, 2011, p. 105). It appears that being able to replicate “a certain type of language,” (Santini, 2011, p. 105) in this case American English can be used as a self-protective means to diminish a sense of being viewed as the other. Rather than asking international faculty members to bear the responsibility of being understood in a “certain type of language,” this is an opportunity for institutions to honestly question whether internationalization means assimilation or acculturation. The former suggests that

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international faculty cannot be their “whole selves” and the latter hopefully suggests that the accents and words that international faculty bring to the classroom are an addition to the learning space rather than a liability.

Outlining Institutional Support

Though our work highlights individualized and faculty-led third spaces, Whitchurch (2018) outlined three types of third spaces that can occur within an institution. The first is an integrated third space, which is explicitly recognized and supported by the institution. This integrated space is embedded in the organizational structure and has the infrastructure to support it. In this integrated third space, negotiation of cultures and identities becomes a collective enterprise as opposed to expecting international faculty to assimilate to places that will not yield.

The second is a semi-autonomous third space where there is institutional buy-in, but there is a measure of independence that allows members to have autonomy in their work process, ideas, and contributions. This is a place where ideas and relationships are incubated, without a predetermined goal as to if, when, and how far they should go. When applied to the experiences of international faculty, these semi-autonomous spaces form part of a network, but one that is loosely tied, until developed through formal recognition and initiatives.

Third, and finally, is an independent third space. Whitchurch (2018) described this as a loose collection of collaborations for a specific purpose. They take place under the radar of the institutional structure, as they are apart from the mainstream. These may not be viewed or considered legitimate but are a place where collaborators can initially connect to identify emergent needs or address existing ones. This type of third space resonates with the experience of the FLC members, whereby for decades loose collections of independent third spaces permeated our campus as international faculty began to grow in number. As faculty earned promotion and tenure and entered the ranks of formal leadership and administration, semi-autonomous teaching and learning third spaces emerged. These spaces were often led by international faculty members who sought to bring others into the conversation and think through ways to collectively advocate for international faculty. Our shift

from independent to semi-autonomous third spaces came about in the form of white papers to the university leadership, workshops for department chairs, and a task force within the Presidential Commission for Racial and Ethnic Diversity to remain focused on international faculty.

A form of institutionally supported integrated third space could be a formal teaching mentoring program that matches international faculty with seasoned local and international faculty well positioned to offer perspectives on classroom culture in the U.S. as well as strategies and techniques to develop and nurture student-teacher relationships that facilitate learning. These mentoring relationships need not be unidirectional as international faculty can also offer their U.S. counterparts perspectives and strategies on how to engage different teaching approaches. Through the efforts of our FLC and other international faculty, our institution agreed to create the position of International Faculty Fellow charged with creating resources and partnerships for teaching mentorship. The International Faculty Fellow has worked closely with the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, colleges, and academic units to identify teaching needs and resources for international faculty.

We would encourage institutions (particularly academic affairs units) to rethink how teaching effectiveness is framed to include consideration of the characteristics of the learners and the instructors (Fink, 2013). As we previously discussed, teaching and learning are culturally and socially grounded phenomena, where both the learner and the instructor’s identity influence how teaching and learning take place. This information is critical for department chairs, deans, and other administrative leaders to consider in evaluating the teaching practices of international faculty, particularly when using best practices to determine excellence in teaching. While centers for teaching and learning exist for faculty and assist in various ways, the call to action is to invest in institutional support structures such as tailored programs, workshops, and consultations with faculty development staff trained in assessing the impact of cultural identities on teaching and learning from an intersectional lens.

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Limitations

Our work closely examines the experiences of seven international faculty members within one institution in the U.S. While the narratives shared reveal important information about the experiences of international faculty, a limitation of qualitative inquiry is generalizability (Schofield, 2002). The narratives presented in this work do not represent the experiences of all international faculty at other institutions in the United States. To ameliorate this limitation, future research might include focus groups composed of international faculty from different institutions across the U.S. The use of focus groups would allow for “a range of perspectives on [a] single topic” (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 100). While international faculty may share familiar experiences, nuances in individual experiences would demonstrate that familiar experiences do not equate to similar experiences.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrated how we situate ourselves as international faculty. In negotiating our cultural and social identities, the third space is a manifestation of our individual and collective agency wherein “opposing or diverse beliefs, thought processes, lifestyles, ways of knowing, and experiences interact and find symmetry” (Saudelli, 2012, p. 103). To appreciate the nuance and complexity of this third space, it is imperative to name and claim the nature of the first and second spaces. The first space (our individual cultural and social identities) engages, at times uneasily, with the second space (teaching within the United States) to broker a third space wherein the juxtaposition of two cultures transforms into a yielding coexistence.

Our paths have led us to reflect on how our cultures of origin have influenced our teaching practice by highlighting 1) opposition: differences between the first and second space, 2) challenges and tension between the first and second space, and 3) hybridity: establishing a third space. We have each approached the third space in a different way to embrace our roles as committed educators while facilitating learning and connecting with students. We return to our faculty colleagues and administrators who are tasked with evaluating the teaching effectiveness of international faculty: teaching and learning involve “cultural differences and different worldviews” that create “multiple realities” for educators and learners (Hutchison, 2016, p. 8). As such, the evaluation of teaching effectiveness must account for the cultural context of teaching and learning, as well as the characteristics of the instructor.

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