

Cultural Partnership Reflection Analysis Paper

Human Relations in a Multi-cultural Society

College of Education

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Introduction

This year, I explored cultural differences and similarities by spending 9 hours with a person from a culture different than mine. During my cultural partnership with May, a Hmong student, I learned a lot about her culture and even learned some new things about myself. We met in my living room and in one of May's favorite restaurants. We also participated together in two special cultural events on campus. This cultural partnership has encouraged me to learn more about other cultures, explore the differences, and celebrate the similarities.

Cultural Partner's Background

May was very proud of her family heritage. Hmong have historically been free, loved freedom, and fought for freedom. Their original homeland for more than 2000 years was in the heart of what is now China. However, they have been without a homeland since the early 1800s. Because of Chinese oppression, they migrated south to the hill and mountain area in northern Laos. At various times, the Hmong were ruled by China, France, Japan, and Laos. May's ancestors settled in areas of Vietnam.

During the Vietnam War, the United States recruited Hmong to fight against Communist North Vietnam. When South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia fell to Communist control in 1975, the Hmong were targeted for extermination by the Communists. May's ancestors fled along with thousands of other Hmong to refugee camps in Thailand, which were closed in 1998.

May is a member of a clan. There are about 18 Hmong clans, which each trace their history to a single male ancestor. Members of the same clan consider each other to be siblings, and they are expected to offer each other mutual support. Members of the same clan cannot marry each other. All children are members of the father's clan, through which they will trace their ancestors. Women become members of their husband's family upon marriage but keep the

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clan name of their father. May said that this can make things confusing, because the wife usually keeps what Americans call her maiden or birth name, which causes others to think that they are not actually married!

May told me that Hmong are also grouped into “Green Hmong” and “White Hmong.” These groups are really based on language dialect and tonality differences. The Hmong language gives a pitch to each spoken syllable, which indicates the word’s meaning. These differences arose because of geographic location, similar to the differences in language dialect between people who live in the Northern states and those who live in the Southern states of the US.

Since 1975, the Hmong have migrated all over the world: Argentina, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand, Thailand, and the United States (California, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Minnesota). May was born in a Thailand refugee camp, where she spent the first 12 years of her life before moving to St. Paul. She struggled to make friends in her 6th grade classroom, and her parents learned to drive as well as read and write in English. Now, more than 25% of the students in the St. Paul School district are Hmong and speak Hmong at home. However, most Hmong under age 30 years speak English first and Hmong second.

During the 2000s, the Hmong population in Minnesota kept growing and expanding outside the Twin Cities, according to 2010 census figures. Data from the 2010 census shows the state’s Hmong population rose from 45,443 in 2000 to 66,181 in 2010, an increase of 46 percent. It also showed a significant expansion away the traditional urban population centers. While Hennepin and Ramsey counties remain home to most Hmong, with about 53,000, suburban Washington County added 3,764 Hmong, or about the same increase as Hennepin County. The Hmong population in Anoka County surged from 720 in 2000 to just over 4,000 in 2010.

Values

Values are the lenses through which I view myself, others, and the world. According to the LifeValues Inventory (Crace and Brown, 2012), my primary values include achievement and spirituality. I used those values in building this cultural partnership with May.

In my family, it has been important to challenge myself to achieve, to work hard, to improve my performance, and to do better. My mother always taught me to “do your best.” My family members graduated from college and achieved graduate degrees. Doing well, with this cultural partnership, meant that I set some clear goals, prepared questions, set a schedule, and kept appointments. Occasionally, I did have to change the plans because of May’s family schedule. That was bit frustrating for me, but it became a learning experience, too.

I learned from May that achievement is also important to her family. Before 1975, there was only one Hmong-American educator with a Ph. D. degree. Now, there are more than 700 Hmong educators, scholars, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals throughout the US. A Hmong woman was elected to the Minnesota Legislature. All of May’s siblings want to be lawyers or doctors, although some might become teachers and business people. May reported that historically, Hmong women were in charge of their home situation, while men worked outside the home. These days, however, even women in her generation are expected to attend college. May is studying to become a lawyer. I respect her sense of ambition.

For my family, it is important to have spiritual beliefs that reflect being a part of something greater than ourselves. I believe in a higher power, and I want to live in harmony with my spiritual beliefs and values. For me, I am a follower of Jesus Christ and value his messages about abundant life and eternal life. My beliefs mean that I respect others and that I am interested

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in their thoughts and experiences, too. This respectful approach was important in this cultural partnership, because the spirituality of May's ancestors seemed different than that of my family.

May's ancestors followed a combination of traditional spiritual practices that included animism and ancestor worship. They believed that spirits inhabit animals and other natural objects, as well as domestic objects such as doorways. They thought that spirits of dead ancestors influence the welfare and health of the living. People could live happily only by living harmoniously with the spirits. So, individuals performed rituals and offered food and spirit money to earn favor. Shamans communicated with the spirits through gongs, dance, and animal sacrifice.

But May's grandfather became Christian when he migrated from Southeast Asia to the US. After some thought, May expressed her observation that Christianity attracted Hmong people because it offers the support and "belonging" of a community. The Hmong traditional spirituality emphasized equilibrium within the universe: people kept that balance by appeasing the forces around them, achieving harmony by responding to locally-revealed phenomena. Christianity is attractive because of its compatibility with Western life. As May explained, many Hmong converted because they thought that Christianity was the religion of the United States. It was a way to coordinate everyday life – as well as events like birth, marriage, and death – in an American universe. To live harmoniously in the new country was to follow the new faith.

Communication Goals

From the SpeakSTRONG Communication Style Quiz, I learned that my communication style is *Achiever* and that I am *Task-Oriented with a Swift Pace* (Rose, 2014). My style is highly focused on direct action for results, and I have little patience for excuses or social nicety. With my *Achiever* style, I want to get things done and get down to business. That means, in order to

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accomplish goals effectively, I think it is essential to save time, as if time is a commodity that might be used up. I do not like to spend time talking about feelings and chatting about how things are going in general. I want to focus on the assignment and the agenda. Although my communication style has strengths, I know that I am likely to be intimidating and to dominate the interaction. I may appear insensitive. I can become impatient and miss opportunities and input from other people.

Therefore, my main communication goal during this partnership was to slow down. I wanted to emphasize the “partnership” part of the assignment. While we talked, I steered the conversation toward the main topics, but I did not treat our exchanges as interrogations or one-way interviews. So, I listened very carefully. As May talked about her culture, I paused (in my reactions) to allow time to reflect more on her actual comments and less on the next questions. I noticed that she would think before she talked about each topic, and then she often would reflect upon what she had said as if she were learning more about herself. During several conversations, she commented that she had not thought about her culture in that way before.

Previous Oppressive Behaviors

McIntosh (1988) has articulated the concept of “white privilege,” which acknowledges that racism puts some (“non-white”) people at disadvantage, while others (“white”) have been taught to not see that racism puts them at an advantage. People like me have an “invisible package of unearned assets” which I can count on in this culture where white people are the dominant social and economic group (McIntosh, 1988, page 2). I am coming to realize that this package is filled with unearned privileges that result in oppressive behaviors toward people like May’s family.

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In the past, I made assumptions about immigrants from Southeast Asia. For example, I assumed that all people from Southeast Asia were the same, whether they came from Japan, Philippines, China, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, or elsewhere. Now, I realize that is a very ignorant point of view. Those places are simply nations, ways of organizing government and geography. The people themselves come from rich cultural and ethnic groups. Labeling many people into one huge group meant that I was not acknowledging or interacting with individuals and smaller groups in ways that were more appropriate for their culture. I was not informed and I was not respectful. As a teacher, this meant that I probably was not including or instructing my students in ways that would help them learn to their highest ability.

I was unaware of the traditional religion in Hmong culture. One common assumption regarding people of Asian descent involves considering all Asians to be Buddhists. My oppression of Hmong culture before this partnership was that all Asians worship Buddha, and once they came to the United States their ways of living did not change. I learned from May that her people wanted to maintain their traditional spirituality, but they were frightened of neighbor reaction if they depended on shamans. Americans, they found, regarded the Hmong as crazy if they beat on gongs, danced, and performed animal sacrifice. The difficulty of maintaining their religious practices in an American society presented a serious problem. The Hmong sought to maintain harmony with their surroundings, but their very practices were incompatible with those surroundings.

Similar, yet Different

May taught me about her cultural tradition of Paj Ntaub (pronounced “pan dao”). And I taught her about one of my favorite hobbies: scrapbooking. These traditions serve basically the same functions: to record family history and to celebrate our places in our families.

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Traditionally, Hmong girls learn to sew and embroider from their mothers and grandmothers. Some of the processes include quilting, batik, applique, and embroidery. Most girls sew their own clothing for the New Year's celebrations. In the Thai refugee camps, women created story cloths, with embroidered images to illustrate their former village life, the war experiences, and life in the refugee camps. In the US, women created story cloths to show the families' success at education, agriculture, and life in America. Some story cloths are small (about 10 inches by 10 inches) and some are very large (more than 10 feet by 10 feet).

May does not sew or embroider very much. Elders in her family were busy earning a living and did not have time to teach her the traditions. For her family, it was important for her to get her education at the university, so she does not really have time. However, May showed me a story cloth that explained her family's migration experience. She became very emotional for her. Her family moved from the Laos hill country, across the river to Thailand refugee camps, across the world to Wisconsin, and then to Minnesota.

As I showed her my childhood scrapbooks, I realized that my family had also moved a lot while I was growing up. We lived in about 23 different houses or apartments before I graduated from high school at age 18 years old. We had fun creating memories together and even developed a few shared-culture words between us that symbolized those memories.

May expressed how she is always learning about her culture and sometimes wishes she was taught more about it when she was younger. So she attends events surrounding the Hmong New Year, traditionally at the end of the harvest season when all agricultural work is finished. In the US, Hmong New Year is observed in late November and early December, like a Thanksgiving holiday. During the celebrations, Hmong dress in traditional clothing and enjoy

traditional foods, dance, music, games, and other types of entertainment. This is a time when May's family passes their culture on to their children.

As May's experience of Hmong New Year is like a giant family reunion, my family has smaller reunions periodically. Two years ago, my husband's extended family had a picnic at our house in North Mankato, Minnesota. We took the usual photos: the youngest present, the oldest present, each family grouping, and everyone together. I am well-acquainted with my own family history. My ancestors arrived in North America more than 150 to 200 years ago from Northern Europe. Three years ago, my mother's extended family from throughout North America met at the family homestead near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We also took the usual photos, but we also had tours of important family heritage sites. These reunions are times when our families pass their culture on to their children and grandchildren.

Current Applications

Through this experience, I came to appreciate the Hmong values of interdependence and humility. I also considered how to use the experience to enrich my teaching at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

I accept my place in my family, and I respect the traditions of my family. My family values interdependence, but I do not always follow the expectations of my family and social group, and I do not always make decisions within the advice of my family and social group. Maybe it seems rather "American" to be so independent instead of interdependent. My experience with May helped me understand the significance of actually living my value of interdependence with family.

My family has emphasized achievement and success. We have not emphasized humility. I listened carefully to May's stories and observed her as an example of the value of being humble

and modest about accomplishments. She was quick to downplay any compliments or praise that came her way. She avoided personal credit for her accomplishments by giving credit to her family and to others. May said that her grandmother taught her: “Be like the bamboo. It is a very thin, but very strong tree. It has deep roots and its stem is flexible enough to bend in the wind without breaking. Be firmly planted in our family and traditions and opinions. Be flexible enough to hear what others have to say without breaking. Be flexible and adapt to change, but be firmly planted in your roots so you never tip over or break.” Her grandmother’s teachings reminded May (and me!) that we are strong when we are rooted in our family, its heritage and traditions, and that we cannot claim all the credit for our achievements – they would not have been possible without our family who came before us.

As a teacher, of future teachers, I believe it is extremely beneficial for future teachers to grasp the concept of culture and to learn more about different cultures every day. Learning more about culture creates an open mind while teaching and disregards all other assumptions that may be presented in a classroom or community atmosphere. This experience has taught me to get acquainted with people who appear different than me and to not predict where they are from or who they are but to instead allow myself to learn new things about them and to not judge them from previous stereotypes. This has taught me to keep an open mind and to think more about culture and how it affects who we are and how we perceive others.

Future Applications

This experience taught me that even though immigrants come to the United States, their change in location does not mean they can practice their same ways of living. As with any immigrant group, Hmong need to maintain their family values in the midst of transition, change, and assimilation.

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The students who come into my classroom are each unique and different from one another. This cultural partnership reminded me that it is important to focus on the person rather than the stereotype and to avoid generalizations. Our communities will only become more diverse which ultimately will affect any group of students I teach.

I have bought several books about Hmong folk stories, story cloths, and migration experiences. I plan to incorporate activities about the Hmong culture into the curriculum of teaching the course, Human Relations in a Multicultural Society.

Conclusion

During this partnership, I demonstrated my own power by initiating the partnership and by asking May questions that I knew might be somewhat uncomfortable for both of us. However, I also gave her the option to decline to answer any of the questions. May answered all my questions and helped me overcome my fears of offending or questioning her cultural beliefs. In fact, our interview became more of a dialogue. May sometimes asked me about how I was raised or what I did differently than her. She was just as interested in my culture which made me feel more comfortable.

My time with May helped me to learn more about another culture as well as about my own culture. I learned about the history, values, and ways of living in the Hmong culture. I also learned about myself in many different ways such as what I value, how I use power, how I communicate to others, and most importantly how this experience has been applied to my life.

Resources

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