

Questioning Personal Identities: Supporting Heritage-Seeking Students Abroad

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Student Learning and Development; Student Services, University/Higher Education

Setting

Kaleo Ichiro Tanaka, a third generation Japanese American who was raised with Japanese, Hawaiian, Japanese-American, and American culture and values, contemplates his personal and cultural identity as he reflects upon his international experiences. He was born and raised in Hawaii, which is considered to be a very diverse and multicultural society. Growing up, he had always felt that he was a part of the Hawaiian, Japanese-American, Japanese, and American cultures.

His paternal grandmother emigrated from Japan to Hawaii to seek a better life. She spoke no English at the time of arrival to Hawaii and until this day, she speaks Hawaiian Creole English (HCE), an English-based creole that reflects Hawaii's diverse culture by encompassing native languages from the plantation workers. As she was not fluent in Standard American English, she encountered hardships due to her language barriers. HCE is spoken, taught, and used in many households in Hawaii.

Kaleo grew up speaking HCE at home with family and friends and using Standard American English at schools, especially in English class. He barely spoke any Japanese and only used Hawaiian in Hawaiian class. In high

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school, he took his first Japanese class and loved it very much. His dream one day was to speak to his grandmother in Japanese without using any English because he wanted to honor her and the Japanese culture. He spent countless hours studying Japanese; he felt that if he didn't speak Japanese fluently, he could not fully understand the Japanese culture as much as he should. He always believed that with language comes culture and the two are inseparable. While learning a language, he is unconsciously and innately learning the culture of that language as well. Thus, as he learned more Japanese, he felt he was becoming more Japanese.

Case

Throughout his life in Hawaii, Kaleo had the opportunity to meet people from around the world. This motivated him to want to experience the world and discover what it has to offer. Despite his low proficiency level of Japanese at the time, he wanted to take a leap of faith and study in Japan to learn about his heritage culture firsthand, as well as perfect his linguistic skills. When he went to college, he consulted with the director of Global Education about the different study abroad options and discovered he had the opportunity to study in Kyoto, Japan for one year.

Prior to studying abroad, Kaleo enrolled in a pre-departure course at his home university. In that course, many elements and aspects of studying abroad were discussed, such as culture shock, but identity was not covered. Most of his interactions with the study abroad office were with peer advisors; he did not receive much guidance from a staff advisor.

He was placed in a Japanese studies program at the host university after arriving in Japan. He attended a welcome ceremony and participated in several different workshops covering practical topics that ranged from life in Kyoto to campus facilities. All the courses taught in this program were in English except the Japanese language classes. If one's Japanese proficiency was high enough, taking regular courses taught in Japanese was permitted. Likewise, Japanese students with high English proficiency could enroll in the courses alongside the study abroad students. During one of the first elective classes, Japanese Literature, the white American professor called for attendance saying, "All the Japanese students, please stand up." Kaleo, thinking he was Japanese because he is of Japanese ancestry, stood up. However, the professor said, "You are not Japanese, you are a study abroad student, a foreigner. Now, sit down." Feeling distraught and speechless, Kaleo bowed his head down and felt tears falling down his face. At that specific moment, he didn't feel "Japanese," nor did he feel that he was welcomed there. Having this bottled up feeling, he decided to seek mental health counseling in Japan because he found that useful at home.

Additionally, he had another upsetting experience regarding his last name. The Japanese language has three different writing systems: Katakana (for loan words and onomatopoeia), Hiragana (for Japanese words when not written in Kanji, to serve as grammatical features, and is phonetic), and Kanji (for words of Chinese etymology and to distinguish homonyms). A person's last name is one of the key elements and connections of personal identity that tells others about their origins and roots. In Japan, Kaleo's name was always written in Katakana and not with the associated Kanji that is available. It was explained to him that because he is a foreigner (who does not hold Japanese citizenship), his last name (although of Japanese origin) needs to be written in Katakana to distinguish the difference between Japanese citizens and people of Japanese descent. This also caused him to question his personal identity because something seemingly as minuscule as one's name can cause disappointing and depressing emotions.

After having these experiences, Kaleo had a personal identity crisis; he did not feel like he could fit in or be accepted by Japanese society. It was difficult for him to find others that understood his situation. He went to the International Office in Japan for advice, but they repeatedly told him to see a mental health professional on campus. While seeking out mental health counseling at his host university, he used Japanese because English-speaking counselors were not available. This to some degree affected how “deeply and thoroughly” he was able to explain his situation. Moreover, he felt that he would never be “Japanese,” which was very disappointing to him. This experience made him think about his identity and how “Japanese” he really was.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How can international educators support students regarding their identity prior to, during, and after their international experiences?
- How should on-site support at the students' host institution be discussed in the pre-departure course?
- How could mental health support be improved for study abroad students at this university?
- How can we support heritage-seeking students in order to prepare them for the possibilities of not “fitting in” with their heritage culture?