Proposal for Presentation at Faculty of Education Graduate Student Symposium 2011

Working Title: The importance of creating awareness of cultural differences through academic preparation programs as part of the acculturation of immigrant professionals to Canadian workplace practices.

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Background
The North American workplace has seen greater diversity of employees in the workforce due to an aging population and increased immigration, a trend that is likely to continue (Laroche & Rutherford, 2007). In the last five years, Canada has received 200,000 – 250,000 immigrants a year (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2010), an increasing percentage of whom hold postsecondary degrees (Plante, 2010). Immigrant professionals face challenges adjusting not only to a new society but also finding work in their fields, thus experiencing what Austin (2005) calls double culture shock. For engineers, for example, cultural and language-based differences become apparent in unfamiliarity with formal and informal professional processes and practice norms (Boyd & Schellenberg, 2007; Friesen, 2009; Girard & Bauder, 2007; Plante, 2010). In addition to language differences, real or perceived discrimination becomes another barrier for immigrant professionals seeking employment (Plante, 2010). Paradoxically, the Canadian need for immigrant professionals to contribute to the economy remains unmet due to the difficulties that internationally educated newcomers experience.

A number of university programs have been developed to address the need for more time-effective, qualifications recognition programs to assist immigrant professionals. For example at the University of Manitoba, the Internationally Educated Engineers Qualification Program (IEEQ) was developed in 2003 as an alternative licensing pathway with lower attrition rates to the traditional confirmatory exam pathway (Friesen, 2009). In 2007, Ryerson University offered a similar program. In addition to addressing licensing concerns, the Manitoba program attempted to ameliorate the social isolation reported by internationally educated engineers and to assist in labour market entry. In the IEEQ program, technical competencies are developed and confirmed through coursework and a work term (co-op). In addition, cultural orientation, language development, and professional networking are addressed for the duration of the program.

This study builds on a study in progress (Ingram, Ens, & Friesen, forthcoming) to discover what international engineering graduates in one intake of the IEEQ program identify as enabling and disabling factors within their co-op work term experiences relative to their longer-term career development. Preliminary findings indicate that explicit academic preparation in cultural differences, mentoring, and networking prior to international engineering graduates entering their co-op work terms has the potential to assist in acculturation to the workplace. The participants of the study identified their academic preparation through the IEEQ program as having prepared them for some of the communication challenges and workplace practices they encountered in their co-op placements. Specifically, participants cited cultural constructs developed by Hofstede (1980, in Laroche, 2003) and used the categories Laroche developed in his text to help understand their own experiences as they recounted expectations and experiences of their co-op work terms.
Students’ growing awareness of the culture and structure of specific working environments is an important element of the school to work transition (Vaezi-Nejad, 2009). However, the double culture shock experienced by immigrant professionals described by Austin (2005) may be better understood using Laroche’s (2003) categories, Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu & Passeron, date) theory involving cultural and social capital, or looking to educational theory, Gee’s (1989, 2000) Discourses or Street’s (2003) literacy practices.

The purpose of the proposed study is to investigate the perceived importance of addressing cultural awareness in a similar program offered by the University of Manitoba Faculty of Education: Academic & Professional Bridging Program for Internationally Educated Teachers (University of Manitoba, 2010). The program serves two types of teachers: those who require academic credentials, and those who already have their teaching certificates and seek mentorship during transition to employment in Manitoba. Building on insights gained from the study with IEEQ participants (Ingram, Ens, & Friesen, forthcoming), perspectives of instructors and participating internationally educated teachers will provide points of comparison for a richer understanding of the professional acculturation process of immigrants to Manitoba.

The proposed study will have significance in its contribution to educator, employer, and immigrant professional understandings of cultural differences as they inform acculturation to professional practice. Conclusions should help to further our understanding of the importance of explicitly addressing cultural difference in academic preparation programs for immigrant professionals seeking work in Manitoba.

**Research Questions**

1. To what extent is culture considered in the Academic & Professional Bridging Program for Internationally Educated Teachers?
2. How do internationally educated teacher participants perceive cultural difference in Canadian workplace practice and employment opportunities?
3. How do workshop and course instructors of the bridging program report addressing cultural differences?

**Methodology**

Building on the prior study with international engineering graduates (Ingram, Ens, & Friesen, forthcoming) this qualitative study will investigate perceptions of instructors and participants of the Academic & Professional Bridging Program for Internationally Educated Teachers on the importance of cultural differences in acculturating to Canadian work environments. Two program instructors and two internationally educated teachers will be interviewed to ascertain their perspectives on the research questions. The research will take place from January - April 2011. In addition to interview transcripts, data examined will include program documents, program website, workshop documents, and program reports. Interviews will be analyzed for themes, which subsequently will be considered using the aforementioned theories.

**Presentation**

Preliminary findings will be presented using PowerPoint slides in March. Depth of reporting will depend on timing of ethics approval and interviewees’ availability.
References


