Exploring Canadian Multicultural Society through Student Ethnography

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Introduction

In recent years, the frequency and total number of university students travelling abroad for international exchange or “homestays” has been increasing steadily. However a large extent of these sojourns remains relatively unorganised and unstructured, in terms of providing any broader learning, understanding or perspective on their experiences, other than living with a host family or attending typical language schools. Although even a short experience abroad can be a tremendous eye opener and provide the relevance, exposure and motivation needed to acquire a foreign language, a slightly more goal oriented approach to preparing and organising these trips could vastly improve the students overall experiences, while developing intercultural communication skills and a more global perspective. With the drastic changes in travel preferences, security issues and world economic and political trends, which have been occurring since 9/11, Canada has emerged as one of the more popular destinations for travel and study abroad. Considering this, how can Canada best serve the needs of today’s language learners in a way that will best prepare them for communication in the steadily evolving global arena.

Apart from its image as a relatively safe country with endless nature, visions of Northern Lights, Polar Bears, and Niagara Falls as well as many outdoor activities or sight seeing opportunities, what can Canada offer foreign students interested in a short “homestay” in terms of a unique and global learning experience? The demographic of such cities as Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal provide a wealth of possibilities for learning about, experiencing and interacting with a diversity of different cultures.

Canada’s multicultural environment presents an opportunity for students to broaden their perspectives, worldviews and attitudes while experiencing aspects of culture on a more global scale than is usually possible during a short visit. By engaging in simple observation and information collecting tasks with members of the local communities, students are able to develop intercultural communication skills and an overall appreciation for diversity and flexibility towards differences and ambiguity.

The procedures and events recounted herein, describe a student initiated and controlled research project which attempted to apply the ethnographic techniques of participant observation, fieldwork and interviewing in order to explore and better understand aspects of Canadian Multicultural communities and the diversity of the population. The purpose of this project was as follows:

1. Experience and Practice Ethnographic Methods in the Field

Having students apply ethnographic methods expands their perspectives and allows them to think critically about social phenomena developing a sense of openness towards differences and a flexibility towards ambiguous situations and intercultural communication. To experience firsthand the practical benefits of ethnography by participating in and learning about culture directly from people, is an important realisation, which can be extended to future encounters with ambiguity or difference. Having students actively engage people in a foreign country can help them get control of their experience, understand cultural differences which can lead to culture shock or miscommunication,
and eliminate the passive, innocent bystander experience, typical of students spending short and limited periods of time away from home.

2. Explore and Engage Multicultural Community:

The level of diversity found in Canada’s Multicultural communities is unique and offers a valuable model for understanding cultural differences and how they can be used as resources rather than obstacles in communication and interaction. This type of Canadian Multiculturalism has the potential to serve as an inspiration for populations with more homogenous communities, which may be on the verge of experiencing intercultural communication on a more personal level, through globalisation, immigration and more frequent and widespread travel.

Rationale

Today’s learners require a deeper understanding and command of comprehensive skills which will assist them with the acquisition and navigation of the finer nuances and sub levels of communication and interaction. Many EFL learners in Japan may have a developed level of language competence but remain uncomfortable, if not incapable of communicating in ambiguous or unfamiliar situations. Students often have difficulty making their own interpretations and tend to create an “us and them” world view and perspective which does little more than reinforce stereotypes and communication barriers. By approaching difference as a resource rather than as a barrier and by engaging in Ethnographic research through observation, participation, interviews, surveys, interaction with others and reflection on discoveries, learners can develop their own world views as well as the skills they require to communicate effectively.

Canada’s level of Multiculturalism is unique and very surprising for people coming from more monocultural backgrounds. It should serve as a role model for other countries and for Globalisation in general in order to help understand all the people in the world.

Background and Demographics

Ethno-cultural Portrait of Canada

- The visible minority population reached 4 million in 2001, a three-fold increase over 1981.
- The Chinese were the largest visible minority group, its numbers surpassing 1 million.
- Over 200 ethnic groups were reported in 2001.

Immigration and Citizenship

- The proportion of foreign-born was the highest in 70 years, at 18% of the total population in 2001.
- The People’s Republic of China was the leading country of birth among immigrants of the 1990s.
- Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal attracted almost three-quarters of 1990’s immigrants.

Aboriginal Peoples of Canada

- The population reporting Aboriginal identity reached nearly 1 million in 2001.
- One third of the Aboriginal population is under age 15, compared with 19% of the non-Aboriginal population.
- More than one in five Aboriginal people moved in the year before the 2001 Census.
In Vancouver, at present, almost 50% of the population consists of a visible minority other than Anglo-Saxon or European origin. These trends are also projected to dramatically rise in the near future as a result of an aging European majority population, a much younger visible minority population and steady increases in immigration. The effects of this change on basic communication, interaction and overall perspectives regarding North America, World English and the Global community in general, will be significant. Through the implementation of Multicultural policies and programs, much is being done in Canada to preserve heritage and identity, promote integration and tolerance, and learn appreciation for diversity in order to avoid prejudice and discrimination. As a major destination for Japanese students, this harmonious and intercultural atmosphere in Vancouver can provide a rewarding learning experience.
Method

The following describes the activities of three, 20 year old, female, 2nd year university students who spent a one month homestay in Vancouver, Canada. The students were majors of International Culture Studies and planned to attend a local English conversation school in order to experience “Canadian Culture” by making Canadian friends while also improving their English. It is important to note that their image of Canada was overly generalised, based on partial stereotypes such as media images of Niagara Falls, Northern Lights, endless nature and wildlife, and that all Canadians were basically of Anglo Saxon origin and ate mostly meat, bread, maple syrup and salmon, not necessarily in that order. They had had limited or no contact with non Japanese people before and two of them had never traveled outside Japan. They were also totally unfamiliar with the concept of multiculturalism and that such societies can exist.

Preparation, Instruction and Background

Before leaving for Canada, the students prepared for their project by first brainstorming ideas regarding their images of Canada and Canadian people including any expectations, preconceptions or stereotypes. At this point students were not aware of the details of the project, had no understanding of ethnography and only a limited knowledge of multiculturalism. Based on these lists an image of Canada began to emerge and students tried to link common themes and develop potential research questions which could be investigated. During the next session, some basic information was presented regarding the nature of Canadian demographics, history and heritage. Following this the students reformulated their opinions and developed their research questions into a more realistic working hypothesis, which could then be tested or researched. Once this task was completed, the students received some training and instruction in ethnographic procedures and methods including the goals of such research, techniques of fieldwork as well as examples of classic ethnographic studies (Spradley, 1979). Following this, students were informed of their “summer ethnographic project” and given more structured details as to how to formulate their research plans, working hypothesis and appropriate fieldwork methodology. Over the next few sessions before leaving on their trip, the students completed their research plans, finalising their interview questions and conducting any required background study. Although the class, in which this activity was conducted, consisted of 20 students only three were travelling abroad, the remaining students carried out their ethnographic projects applying the same methods locally.

Materials

Video camera, voice recorder, notebook, iPod

Although this type of research activity is based on a fairly simple and straightforward procedure for data collection and interpretation, there is quite a range of equipment which can be used to conduct the ethnographies. The traditional ethnographer in the jungle may have made do with only a pad and pencil, nowadays however, the most useful tool turned out to be the ubiquitous MP3 player with a microphone for recording. In many cases the students did take notes, though this tended to disrupt the interview sessions and were much less accurate. Video cameras similarly provided more accuracy than written interpretations and could be analysed and reviewed at leisure afterwards, however these were rather obtrusive and insensitive in cases were more subtle observational data was needed, often discouraging potential subjects from participating. The final item of technology which proved to be quite versatile and innovative was the use of the iPod for presentation. The more advanced students were able to combine video clips, PowerPoint slides, pictures and samples of audio recordings effortlessly by connecting their iPod to a TV or projector. The use of these different materials and tools, greatly added to the ethnographic research experience in that the results became more accurate as interpretation was facilitated by instant recall, students became more confident in their techniques as the
The weakest link was no longer perceived to be their English comprehension skills and final presentations tended to be more entertaining and informative in that a range of media formats could be readily accessed and displayed. Nevertheless, it is more important to carefully consider budget, goals, skills research methods and contexts when determining what type of equipment is needed or suitable.

The Project

Research Goals:
Understand more about Canadian Multicultural Identity

Hypothesis:
What does it mean to be Canadian? Is it possible to identify a Canadian Culture?

Methods
Interview people of different backgrounds to better understand their perspectives. Observe daily life and customs and practices to learn more about how multiculturalism is integrated into Canadian Society.

Research Questions
What does it mean to be Canadian? What is Canadian identity?
What makes Canada unique? How is Canada different from America?
What exactly is multiculturalism? Is it really such a good thing?
How do people feel about multiculturalism and their heritage?

Interview Questions
How long have you lived in Canada?
Where are you from originally? Why did you come to Canada?
What is Canadian Identity? What is unique about Canada?
How do you feel about multiculturalism?

What are some positive or negative experiences of multiculturalism you have had?
Have you ever experienced racism or discrimination?
Was/is it easy to integrate into Canadian life/society?
Did you have to give up some of your home culture to live in Canada?
How much of your heritage do you still keep now?
What do you think about your identity now? Do you feel you are a Canadian?
What would you change about Canada?
How do you see Canada in the future?
What can other countries learn from Canada?

Procedure and Planning
The fieldwork section of the project began slowly and with much anxiety. Deciding how and where to begin was a challenge as the students were not familiar with the city. At first they planned to go to stereotypically obvious venues such as Chinatown to seek out informants. They soon realised however, that multiculturalism existed everywhere not just in isolated communities or ghettos as they had previously imagined. With this discovery, they soon decided that the best course of action was to just wander around the popular downtown areas and choose informants at random. They set out as a group of three equipped with a video camera, voice recorder, list of interview questions and a notebook. They decided to alternate between roles of interviewer and recorder with two students approaching an informant and beginning the interview while the third waited in the background filming the whole process.

Fieldwork- Observation, Interview
As the students prepared to go out into the field they were quite nervous and apprehensive. Although they had carefully planned their interviews and approach, they had no idea what to expect or how informants would react. Nevertheless after the initial shock, students quickly developed confidence and found the fieldwork quite exciting. Part of the learning here was in discovering that it was not totally unacceptable in certain cultures or contexts to start a
conversation and ask personal questions to a total stranger. Upon approaching a potential informant, students had to make their intentions clear, stating that they were conducting ethnographic research on multiculturalism for a school project and asking if they would be willing to participate in an interview which would be filmed and recorded. If the informants agreed, the interview would begin. In most cases informants were very understanding and helpful with less than 10% refusing to participate. Several informants registered surprise at questions such as Where are you from? and What is your identity? When several people laughed and said Canada or Canadian the students were unsure how to react or continue. With this they came to realise that a large proportion of visible minorities were not foreigners as is the case in Japan. In some cases the students English was better than the informants this was also quite a shock as they expected everyone in Canada to have a high level of English proficiency. They were equally surprised when some of the informants presumed they were Canadian university students as they assumed it was obvious that they were Japanese. From the fieldwork, the students were enlightened in two significant ways; the first was through the comprehensive data they intended to record as part of their research and the second was a result of the unintentional learning and discovery they received by interacting with different people and challenging their stereotypes and preconceptions. Both are essential components of the fieldwork experience and the Ethnographic Research Cycle.

Subjects
The students interviewed a total of 18 “Canadians” of various heritages. The subjects backgrounds and relevant personal data are as follows: a an African (Rwanda) male, mid 30s, Maltese female, early 60s, Iranian male, mid 40s, Indian (Sikh) male, mid 30s, Indian (Hindu) male and female, mid 30s and mid 20s respectively, British male, late 60s, Coast Salish male, mid 30s, Philippine male early 30s, Vietnamese male, mid 30s, Hong Kong female, early 30s, Taiwanese female, late 20s, Chinese male (20s and late 50s, Palestinian (Lebanon) male, late German female, mid 60s, Mexican female, early 20s and several “Hybrid Canadians” which were from mixed heritage but born in Canada. Although they were outgoing, enthusiastic and quickly overcame their reservation in approaching strangers, they tended to focus only on visible minorities which takes away from the validity of the research in that they all but excluded anyone who matched a white Anglos Saxon stereotype. In a future ethnography project students should be made aware of this tendency of seeking out exotic or potentially fruitful informants based on appearances alone.

Sample of Subjects Responses

Why did you come to Canada?
- “Through marriage.” (German)
- “To get a better life.” (Vietnamese)
- “I was offered a job and opportunities then were better here than in Europe.” (UK)
- “Most of my family was here already.” (Indian)
- “I came as a student got a job and decided to stay.” (African)
- “I couldn’t relate to the situations in the Middle East anymore.” (Lebanese)

How do you feel about multiculturalism?
- “It’s beautiful.” “I like it a lot.” (Coast Salish)
“It’s why I came here instead of America.” (Iranian)

“We can learn from each other and get wisdom that isn’t possible when everyone is same.” (Chinese)

“It’s basically good but sometimes there is too much focus on differences and harmony some groups take advantage of it.” (Sikh)

**Was it difficult to integrate into Canadian Society?**

- “Canada welcomed me with open arms.” (Taiwanese)
- “I was given a job and was able to see more of Canada than people who were born here.” (Hong Kong)
- “Society in Germany is very structured in Canada I could be more free.”
- “It’s a lot easier for women here than in India”

**Did you have to give up some of your home culture to live in Canada?**

- “No, I feel I can choose, sometimes I can be Canadian and sometimes I can be Maltese.”
- “When I travel I am Canadian but when I am here I always say I am Palestinian.”

**How much of your heritage do you still keep now?**

- “We meet with some members of the communities on special occasions to do traditional holidays and ceremonies, mostly for the kids and old people.” (Indian)
- “We try to keep the language but mostly it’s just the food.” (Chinese)

**What is Canadian identity?**

- “One of the biggest fears Canadians have is to be thought of as American.” (UK)
- “Canadian identity maybe is tolerance and trying to be different.” (Vietnamese)
- “There isn’t one that’s what’s so good about it.” (Chinese)
- “We are all just people here together in the world and it happens to be a place called Canada.” (Indian)

**Analysis, Reflection and Interpretation**

As the students analysed and went over their data, a complicated image of Canada emerged. They were expecting to reach a concrete understanding or conclusion by piecing together the informant responses. In a sense they were looking at the data in an attempt to create a new stereotype to replace the old ones that they had just dispelled. What they came up with was a confused and ambiguous mix of impressions and they were seemingly no closer to understanding multiculturalism and Canadian identity than they were to begin with. This brought home the notion that the purpose of this type of research was not to reach a clear conclusion but to carefully describe context specific phenomena. The student’s learning paradigm required them to come up with black or white distinctions which were not possible in this type of data and methodology. Reaching this conclusion was yet another hurdle they had to overcome in developing their deeper understanding and awareness of differences. In the end they accepted that Multiculturalism and Canadian identity were so easily categorised and quantified and that this realisation of culture and ethnicity being “case by case” in the shadow of more prevailing stereotypes was in fact the essence of what made Canada unique.

**Student Reflection, Conclusions and Comments**

“Upon arriving in Canada we were surprised by the many types of different people. I thought how can so many people of mixed race, religion and background live together peacefully in one place. In this way Canada is very different from Japan and I wanted to learn more about Multiculturalism and Canadian identity. What are Canadians feelings towards their heritage? I am Japanese and am proud of my Japanese Culture. Canadians have a diverse
background, so are Canadians proud of their culture or of another country or their parent’s culture? Or is their culture dependent on time and place? In particular we wanted to know the answers to the following questions.”

- What makes Canada unique?
- How is Canada different from America?
- How do people feel about multiculturalism and their heritage?
- What exactly is multiculturalism is it really such a good thing?
- What is Canadian culture or identity?

“What makes Canada unique? How is Canada different from America? How do people feel about multiculturalism and their heritage? What exactly is multiculturalism is it really such a good thing? What is Canadian culture or identity? “We decided to ask people some basic question to find out more about Canadian society.”

- Where are you from?
- When did you come to Canada?
- Why did you come to Canada?
- What do you think about multiculturalism?
- Was it easy for you to integrate into Canadian society?
- What are some differences between Canada and your country of origin?

“We found that Canadians are very kind tolerant and flexible regardless of their background. People can get any job and not care about race. People are all equal and don’t care so much about differences and their social position.” “However there is a clear distinction between rich and poor some people have very big and expensive houses with huge land but when I cross the street downtown many people ask me for money and there were many drug users and homeless people. Basically I feel that Canada has a very loose society that doesn’t distinguish racial, religious or ethnic differences very much but care about material differences. I think Canadians just want to live in peace and harmony they are proud of their culture and multicultural society and could feel a strong sense of Canadian identity but it is difficult to explain exactly what that is.”

Presentation: Ipod, PowerPoint, Slide Show, Video

The final stage of this project involved the presentation of experiences, research methods, results and interpretations to the class. These presentations were evaluated based on their creativity, innovation, final analysis and overall reflection. It is important that students understand that this type of inquiry need not reach a final conclusion or clearly answer a research question. The process, analysis and interpretation are the key points in Ethnography and the final goal is to carefully describe a case specific activity or behaviour by a particular population. The presentations were scheduled for 15 minutes followed by 5 minutes for questions and discussion. Each student prepared a PowerPoint presentation describing their project in detail and highlighting results and interpretations as well as posing questions for the class and suggestions for further research. As a matter of convenience and practicality, students were encouraged to convert their slideshows to Jpeg format and conduct their presentations using an iPod. Most students were able to do so and found this method of presentation to be much simpler and efficient. Students with the technological skills also showed short videos of their research and fieldwork experiences. Although evaluation was primarily based on the project and presentation, a significant part of their final score came from their participation efforts.
in order to encourage questions and discussion after each presentation.

Student’s Comments

Student’s comments on ethnographic research and conducting fieldwork.

• “I became to pay attention to the difference way of thinking not only different culture but also generation.”
• “I learned how much information we can understand from studying about one small thing. And that it can spread to several possibilities of studying human behaviour and relations.”
• “Giving a presentation in English is the most important. It’s not just writing or speaking English, so I have to consider the content of the research.”
• “To make a presentation – prepare my ideas was very challenging.”
• “Developing hypothesis, I think this was very important because we have to motivated ourselves with our own hypothesis and the research will have a good beginning. “
• “I needed patience, listening to others opinions”
• “I can make a hypothesis, branch idea easier than reading research for me.”
• “I prefer conducting fieldwork research because I could understand the conclusion as experience. It’s unforgettable.”

• “Fieldwork research can be more exciting because you can actually interact with people But it can be more complicated since all of us has different thoughts and idea, it would be hard to put together the results.”
• “Fieldwork research is not easy as it seems. I prefer fieldwork research (although it depends on the situation) because I can see for my self.”
• “I prefer conducting fieldwork research because I feel like studying more than reading.”
• “Fieldwork because reading in book is also theory when you conduct a research it must be in the field.”
• “I like the interaction with informants (fieldwork), Reading research can get tedious.”
• “Induction from data I like. Fieldwork is concrete.”
• “To develop the my ideas and plan from nothing was unbelievable”
• “After I finish this research, I could guess what people are thinking and feeling with body languages.”
• “I was able to study and think about what I never noticed in my daily life.”
• “Interviewing by asking questions was something I thought I couldn’t do but it was fun.”
• “Observing and interviewing, collecting data gave me a lot of different views.”
• “I forgotten how important the English speaking is, even though I’m a student of Faculty of International Culture, I haven’t used English a couple of years at all. But I realize I can’t do my research without English.”
• “I noticed that I can’t to express my abstract feeling in English. If I were good at English I could tell my thought to others.”
Conclusion

From the student’s results, reflections and comments, it would seem that the project was successful in motivating them to actively engage members of various communities and approach cultural differences more objectively. The students also appear to have gained insight into multiculturalism and can better appreciate diversity. An example of this sense of raised awareness is evident in their interpretations of one interview with a Coast Salish Native Canadian. After completing the interview the students believed the subject to have originally come from Thailand and based their results and interpretations on that impression. However after revisiting their notes and listening to the recorded dialogue, they discovered that the subject had actually said First Nations Canadian and mentioned the name of his Band, which they had misunderstood. In order to fully process this information the students needed to research local area Native Bands to determine the subject’s background, thereby also discovering the extent of diversity prevalent just within the First Nations communities. Whether or not they improved their intercultural communication skills or broadened their perspectives in a way that would allow them to approach ambiguity and differences more flexibly, remains to be seen. However it is plausible to assume that given the amount and nature of exposure, communication and interaction with various groups and persons the students would have had to use more varied and improvised strategies for communication, interpretation and meaning negotiation. The most significant result however, is the fact that, had they not participated in the ethnographic project, they would not have been able to communicate with such a wide range of people and their experiences in Canada would have most likely been limited to their “homestay” families and members of their English classes. This in itself is important in that not only were they able to communicate in different ways with a range of different people in different communities and contexts, they were also able, through the project, to reflect on this interaction and critically analyse, evaluate and interpret their experiences in a more objective and perhaps meaningful way. By adding an ethnographic research component as a means of providing structure to the travel abroad experiences, through more careful planning and by creating relevant goals regarding expectations, students were able to maximise their synthesis of otherness and bring home their experiences and discoveries as a comprehensive awareness that would otherwise likely have remained polarised as an “us and them” perspective.

References


The author would also like to acknowledge the efforts of Yasuha Suzuki, Natsuki Ito and Ayami Ikeno for their participation and assistance in the completion of this project.
カナダの多文化社会の探究：民族学プロジェクト

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概要

近年、国際交流やホームステイなどで海外へ渡航する大学の学生が大幅に増えている。しかし、こういった学生たちの滞在は、ホストファミリーとの生活や、いわゆる語学スクールへの参加が中心であり、より広い意味で、多文化理解を深め視野を広げるような組織だった試みはあまりないのが現状である。もちろん、海外経験は短期間であっても、外国語を習得する意義深さに気づき、また学習意欲を高める点で啓発的である。しかし、これらの滞在を目的指向のものに少々改善するだけで、学生たちの経験の幅は大幅に広がり、異文化間コミュニケーションのスキル向上や視野の更なる拡大が見込める。

2001年の同時多発テロ以降、安全の問題や政治経済上の理由から、海外渡航先の選択に大きく変化が生じ、カナダはいまや海外旅行や留学先として最も人気のある目的地の一つとなった。今日急速に発展進化を遂げる地球社会の中で、カナダは、異文化コミュニケーションを図っていく語学学習者のニーズにどのように応えることができるのかが注目される。

本稿は、参加者観察・フィールドワーク・インタビューなどの民俗学の技法を用いて、カナダの多文化地域社会の諸側面を探求しようとする学生主導型の研究プロジェクトを紹介する。

（2007年11月5日受理）