Innovating a constructivist learning model to instill cultural diversity respect into youths in a Thai tourism community

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A B S T R A C T

Local cultures are social tools to facilitate harmonious existence of man and environment. But today globalization process intensely reduced cultural diversity and would impact on harmonious man-environment co-existence. This study was based on an instrument case of the Kudijeen multicultural tourism community where local residents possessed diverse ethnicities, religions and ways of life and offered their sundry cultures as tourist attractions. This community possessed high risks of cultural losses and clashes due to internal diversity as well as arrivals of external cultures brought by visiting tourists and its context was favorable for devising a learning tool to reduce the risks. The study was aimed at assessing the cultural diversity respect of youths in the community and innovating and evaluating a learning process to elevate their respect. The study used the qualitative approach in collecting data relating to the historical, demographical and cultural background of the studied community and using the action research process, particularly the after-action reflection, to innovate a model for learning of cultural diversity respect through a joint effort of 15 voluntary youths and 22 community experts.

The results of the study revealed that, prior to their participation in the study, the youths had low level of cultural diversity respect. In nine months of their learning action, the youths cultivated their respect to the level that they pre-determined. From their learning action, a constructivist learning model was innovated. In the L-CULTURA or the Learn-to-Cultivate Cultures Model, the youths engaged in nine spiraling steps of taking up challenges, checking stocks, planning self-study, searching for new information, sorting the information, conveying the information, getting feedbacks, reflecting on learning experience and creating habits. Community experts and the researchers played roles in scaffolding their learning process as motivators, stimulators, challengers, advisors, resource persons and facilitators.

Introduction

Natural environment had a significant role in determining the cultural pattern of each locality. Differences in the natural environment led to differences or diversity of cultural patterns, enabling local residents to live in harmony with their natural environment (Steward, 1955; Taylor, 1871). The recent globalized economic development, however, has veiled considerable impacts on local cultures. The new global consumerism culture is not only depleting natural resources, creating competition and conflicts but also luring local residents away from their natural environment and cultures. Tourism communities are good examples of localities with high intensity of

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cultural interactions. Amid cultural clashes, suppression, assimilation, domination and resistance, homogenization, heterogenization and hybridization (Netphokaew, 2004), local residents, especially youths, have a high tendency to become oblivious of the relationship between their natural environment and cultures, unable to evaluate their situation and fail to make an appropriate decision as to how to lead a sustainable and peaceful way of life. The communities have high risks of losing their own cultures as much as embracing foreign cultures that are not appropriate for their environment.

The formal education that the youths in high risk communities enroll could hardly fill up the widening gap because the education itself is designed without considering contextual diversity of localities and often treats the youths as passive learners (Worawan Na Ayudhaya, 1996). There is a need to fill in the gap by engaging the youths in an active learning process so that they develop skills to acquire knowledge about their cultures and apply their cultural learning skills to develop cultural diversity respect. Based on the learning philosophy of social constructivism that places importance on experiential and cooperative learning, this study was aimed at innovating a constructivist learning model to cultivate cultural diversity respect among youths in a tourism community. Its three purposes include: (1) evaluating the present level of cultural diversity respect of the youths, (2) innovating a constructivist learning model for cultural diversity respect through their action learning, and (3) evaluating their achievement in learning the cultural diversity respect.

Theoretical Framework

This study premised itself on three theoretical bases in order to pave way for the innovation of cultural diversity respect learning model. The first basis was the cultural studies discipline that stressed the importance of cultural diversity in maintaining natural environment diversity for sustainable living (Satienthai & Jarusombat, 2011) and cultural diversity respect for peaceful living (Phongsaphit, 1997). The discipline helped to define the cultural diversity respect learning goals as comprising an appreciation of own cultures, a sense of self and community culture protection, and respect for other cultures.

The second premise was the environmental education discipline that prescribed six learning objectives of knowledge, skill, participation, awareness, attitude, and ability on evaluation (CDE, 1997). Integrating these objectives with the innovation goals, the indicators of cultural diversity respect learning were defined as including the knowledge on the meanings of local and other cultures, skills and participation in the search for the meanings, presentation of local cultures, recognition of the importance of local and other cultures, acceptance of responsibilities as a community member, positive attitude towards the value of local and other cultures and ability to evaluate the situation and decide an appropriate action.

To find the means attain the innovation goals and learning indicators, the study premised itself on the philosophy of constructivism. The philosophy believed that active experience instilled deep learning, attitude and

ability to apply the new knowledge and learning strategies in other contexts (Cook & Cook, 2005; Richardson, 1994). In addition, the philosophy explained that physical and social environment, maturity, social interactions, language, perception, belief, needs, interest, background, and expectation could influence the construction of new knowledge (Anthony, 1996; Gredler, 1997), expand the learners' "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1987), and shore them up to Piaget's equilibration through knowledge assimilation and accommodation (Sutherland, 1992). Appropriate supports from other people (Duffy & Cunningham, 1984; Osborn & Freyberg, 1985) were helpful but the learners themselves were responsible for their own learning.

These three disciplines were integrated to provide the means and ends in the innovation of a cultural diversity respect learning model in this study.

Research Methodology

The study was based on the instrument case of the Kudijeen community in Wat Kalaya Subdistrict, Thonburi District of Bangkok. Kudijeen was established in the Ayutthaya era as a trading post run by Chinese merchants and became a multicultural community when Thai and foreigners fled the succumbing Ayutthaya to settle here. Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism, Catholicism and Islam turned it into a multicultural community. The recent community-based tourism exposed the community to even more cultures brought by tourists. Unless the local residents especially youths were equipped with cultural learning skills and developed cultural diversity respect, cultural clashes would be imminent. This community was thus in need of the cultural diversity learning and at the same time provided a good ambience for innovating a cultural diversity respect learning model.

Fifteen youths who participated in the study were recruited based on three major criteria, i.e. their volunteerships and guardians' permissions, their ages and their cultural backgrounds. In order to allow for the willingness of the research participants, the research process engaged them only during weekends when they did not go to school. They were in the age range of 12–17 which was considered an appropriate range for cultivating cultures (Foster, 1969) and the range that possessed high risks of infatuation in fashionable media and culture (Sinlarat, 2013) that drew them away from cultural learning, posing a threat of larger cultural divide for the future generation. These seven boys and eight girls were from diverse cultural backgrounds; four were Mahayana Buddhists, three were Hinayana Buddhists, four were Catholics and four were Muslims. Twenty-two people identified by local residents as knowledgeable in local cultures also participated in the research process in various capacities.

The research conducted from March 2013 to February 2014 followed the qualitative and action research approaches. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews of community experts and youths regarding the general community conditions and the preproject levels of the youths' cultural diversity respect. The action research approach engaged the youths in

constructing their cultural diversity respect by following the plan-do-check-act spirals over a period of nine months. In each spiral, first, the youths reviewed their knowledge and planned their learning targets and processes. Second, they implemented their plans by exposing themselves to on-field community cultures and seeking cultural information from various sources. Then, they shared their knowledge with their peers and the community experts and the researchers. In this stage, they, the community experts and the researchers assessed their achievement by using the scoring rubric to measure their cultural diversity respect. Finally, they reflected on their learning activities and preparing the plan for the second spiral of plan-do-check-act. Through reflections at the end of each spiral, the learning process gradually appeared. The after-action review organized after the youths had reached the learning target allowed the research participants to revisit the process and finalize the learning model and scaffolds. The validity of the data and analyses was checked by the triangulation of the youths, the community experts and the researchers throughout the study.

Research Findings

The Level of Cultural Diversity Respect

Before engaging in the action research, the youths in the study had low score (15%) of cultural diversity respect. Their appreciation of own culture, sense of self and community culture protection and respect for other cultures were 20 percent, 14 percent and 13 percent, respectively. Dramatic social changes, fast economic development, reduction in family size, educational value, access to information technology, the attitude of the young generation regarding their existence amid friends, peer imitation and household chores and the cultural promotion approach of

external organizations were identified as contributing to their low level of respect.

The Constructivist Learning Process for Cultural Diversity Respect

Records of process developments were analyzed by a joint sitting of all research participants to identify the stages of the youths' constructivist learning process. The process entitled the L-CULTURA or the Learn-to-Cultivate Cultures Model (Figure 1) comprised of stages and learning scaffolds as follows.

Stages of the L-CULTURA Model

Stage 1: Taking-up Challenges. The youths felt it was challenging to participate in the cultural learning process when the researchers contacted them through community elders whom they and their guardians trusted.

Stage 2: Checking Stocks. The youths investigated their existing knowledge about their own and other cultures. In their own language and gestures, they expressed their background knowledge, understanding, thoughts, experience, and imagination. So doing, they became realized of the gaps of knowledge that they wanted to fulfill. This was the stage that the youths often revisited when they found their learning achievement was lower than expected.

Stage 3: Planning Self-Study. The youths collaboratively created their learning plan, identifying how they would find new knowledge and evaluate their own performance. The plan was flexible and often amended, making this another stage that they often revisited when they were not satisfied with their learning progress.

Stage 4: Searching for New Information. The youths exposed themselves to their local cultural landscape, gathering new information and experience. The exposures included visits to local cultural sources, interviews with the
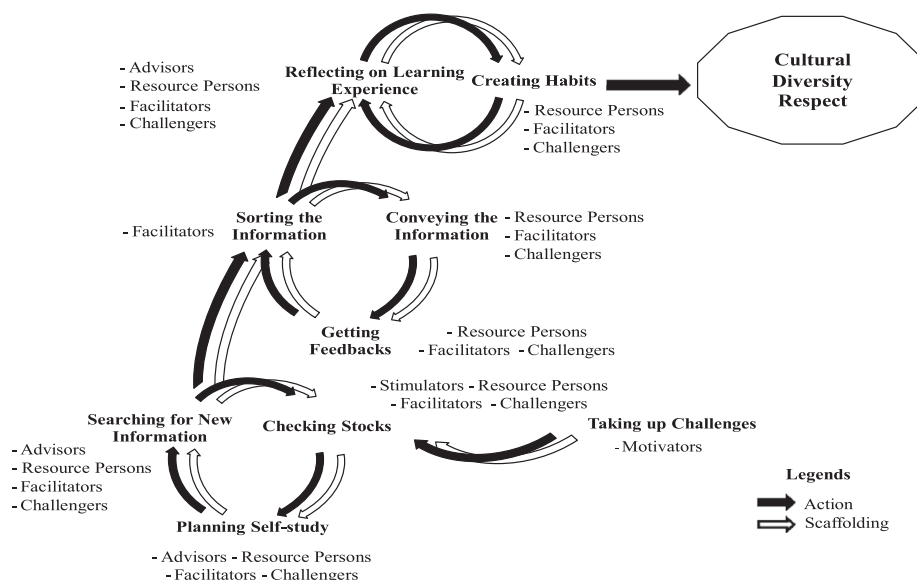
Figure 1 L-CULTURA: The Learn-to-Cultivate Cultures Model
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community knowledgeable, hands-on experience, viewing of demonstrations and documentaries, and additional readings.

Stage 5: Sorting the Information. The youths compiled the knowledge and experience that all their peers had obtained. By relating their existing knowledge and experience with the new ones, the youths either assimilated or adjusted their knowledge base to accommodate them depending on the congruence between the two.

Stage 6: Conveying the Information. The youths practiced conveying the newly obtained information through discussions and gestures. Initially, the language that they used was but mimics of those from the original information sources. The observable broken language indicated their shallow understanding. Gradually, they started to develop their own language to convey the information in a more sensible way, reflecting their success in deeply embracing the new knowledge.

Stage 7: Getting Feedbacks. The youths' learning progress was longitudinally evaluated by the community experts, the researchers and the youths themselves. In addition to knowing the level of their achievement, in this stage the youths also benefitted from consensus-building regarding the new knowledge and stimulations to continue working until attaining their desirable achievement level.

Stage 8: Reflecting on Learning Experience. In this stage, the youths reflected on their action learning and the results of the learning. Exchanging their reflections with their peers enabled the youths to perceive the strengths and weaknesses of their learning process and helped them to improve their future learning strategies.

Stage 9: Creating Habits. In addition to obtaining the new knowledge, the youths became familiar with the constructivist learning process. It was observable during the presentation of their own cultures to outsiders and their visits to exchange cultures with youths in other communities that they had developed new habits of appreciating their own cultures, protecting themselves and their community cultures and respecting other cultures.

Learning Scaffolds

In the study, the community experts and the researchers took roles as learning scaffolds as indicated in Figure 1 and provided learning supports as follows:

- Motivators: They motivated the youths to learn about cultures by offering them opportunities to learn in action, liberty to devise their learning process inside their community, and chances for cultural exchanges with youths from other communities.
- Stimulators: They screened a documentary on the history of the Thonburi dynasty to stimulate the youths' pride in their community's contributions to the nation-building, resulting in their higher motivation to learn about their local cultures.
- Advisors: They recommended the youths to tap knowledge from multiple sources in the stage of planning for self-study, and to prepare their questions in advance in the stage of searching for new information so that they could elicit information more effectively. They

gave feedbacks in the reflection sessions to help the youths to see the strengths and weaknesses of their learning process.

- Resource persons: They supported the youths with cultural contents and action that was tenable to learning.
- Facilitators: They facilitated the youths' learning by providing them with necessary materials, setting appointments with resources persons for them, supporting their moderation of the knowledge exchange and summarizing sessions, assessing their learning experience, and maintaining favorable learning environment.
- Challengers: They asked questions to challenge the youths to roll their learning process, to integrate their existing with the new knowledge, and to express their newly constructed knowledge.

Gradual Expansion of Learning Achievement

The L-CULTURA Model was effective in gradually fostering cultural diversity respect of the youths in learning spirals as illustrated in Figure 2. The youths' overall score rose from 15 percent to the targeted 80 percent. Their achievement in the first two dimensions of appreciation of own culture (80%) and sense of self and community protection (88%) was higher than in the last dimension of respect for other cultures (60%) due to the lower frequency of spirals for the latter.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Through this research, the L-CULTURA Model was innovated for boosting the level of own cultural appreciation, the sense of self and community protection and the respect for other cultures among youths in high risk communities. In addition to catching the youths' attention to their environment, the learning model helped to draw the younger generation into closer relationships with the older generation. This relationship was important for acculturation of the youths (Wannasiri, 2007) but went missing in the globalized world.

The constructivist model worked well with teenagers who enjoyed liberty and challenge in setting their own goals, finding their own way to search for what they wanted, and feeling elated to be with friends and proud of their discoveries. The approach sharpened their learning and thinking skills and equipped them with capacities for lifelong learning, even in other contexts or contents.

This model comprised more stages and spirals than learning models in the formal education system where constructivism was mostly applied with science education (Martin, Sexton, Wagner, & Gerlovich, 1994; Yager, 1991). Despite similarities of stages that came in variations of terms such as invitation, problem setting, learners grouping, planning, elicitation of prior knowledge, searching/exploration, braining storming/discussion, restructuring of ideas/linking of new with existing information, conclusion/presentation, application of ideas/implementation/invention, and review/evaluation, this innovative model was unique for its Stage 8 in which the youths
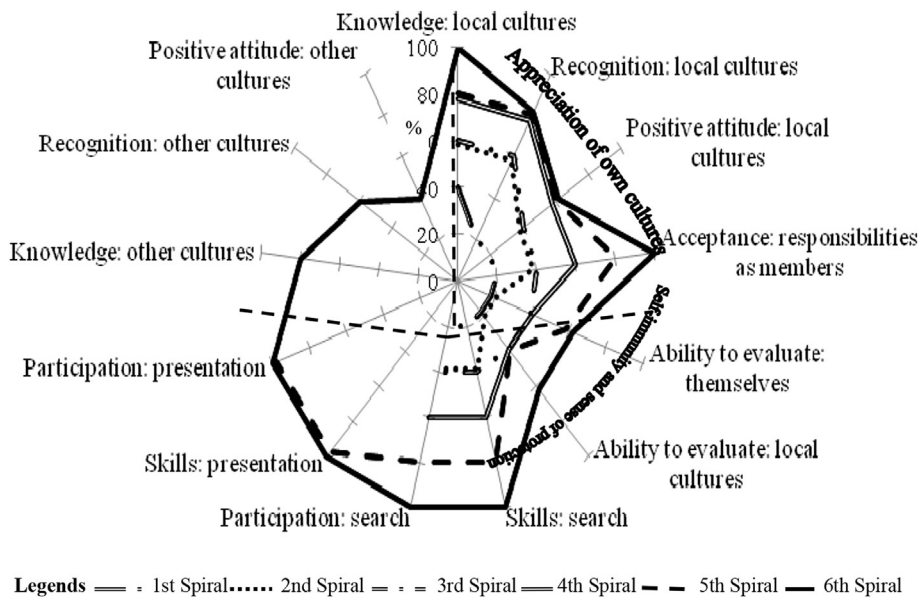
Figure 2 The gradual expansion of cultural diversity respect in learning spirals
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reflected on their learning experience. This stage was important in deepening their learning of the cultural contents as well as improving their learning skills because they had opportunities to consider the strengths and weaknesses of their learning process and receive feedbacks from their peers, the community experts and the researchers.

Recommendations for Further Research

It was observable that, in the earlier learning spirals, the youths progressed in terms of their knowledge, recognition and attitude towards their own and other cultures. But in the later spirals, spiral 4–6 as shown in Figure 1, they did not demonstrate progress in terms of attitude towards their own and other cultures. It was thus intriguing to investigate in further studies what impeded their progress in this regard and in what way their progress could be enhanced.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

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