Screened Out?:
Determining the Relevance of Pre-Departure Orientations to Gay Male Adult Educators Teaching Abroad

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Abstract: Pre-departure orientations are important training resources to any adult educator going abroad to work in a developing nation. Pre-departure orientations provide valuable information about cultural, language, and political differences that could shape particular adult learning scenarios. The paper highlights how pre-departure orientations tackle the topic of sexuality from two perspectives. First, in the broad sense of communicating how sexuality is understood differently everywhere, and second, in the sense of training gay male adult educators how to navigate their sexual identity in the adult learning scenario. Findings from this preliminary study indicate that sexuality is largely avoided within pre-departure orientations.

Introductory Context

Journal Entry #2, May 30th, 2002

This is quite a peculiar place. I’m attempting to understand as much as I can about the job – but I am missing some of the basics because I’m trying to understand the culture, language, people, power dynamics, customs, food and the list goes on. In Japan, the job was easier, which made everything else not as difficult to adapt to. However, this is a different story. I am struck by everything at once. And it will take longer for me to adjust.

I wrote this paragraph as part of my journal entry after only living in Kosovo for ten days. I was hired as an intern to a teacher-training project that was meant to last six months, but I stayed with the project for two years. What struck me at the beginning of my work in Kosovo was an overwhelming sense of urgency to adapt and “figure out” many elements of living in Kosovo. My immediate questions were: How am I going to cope living in this tense atmosphere? Why wasn’t I prepared for such cultural differences in Kosovo? How can I create a positive learning environment for my students if I am trying to discreetly navigate my sexual identity? Where would I ever find other queer folks to start building my social support?

For some educators, understanding cultural differences in an adult learning context might not be an urgent consideration. However, for individuals who have experience being oppressed in society, like myself, understanding how particular identity-differences are regarded upon in the classroom becomes an important matter for job success as an educator (Brown, 1997). More to the point, I need to be able to understand a) how students perceive a homosexuality, b) where to find queer support, and c) which curricular topics are too risky for the students in order to employ strategies that safely navigate my gay male identity in the classroom while maintaining a positive learning experience.

Yet, by the time of writing this journal entry, I had already been introduced to a particular understanding of sexuality in Kosovo that sparked anxiety. For instance, my colleagues asked
me on the first day of my arrival into Kosovo about my marital status and about my preferred type of “girl”. Unlike some other men, I understood that questions such as “do you have a girlfriend?” meant “are you straight or gay?” because my response divulged clues regarding my sexual preference. Later on in the week, it was “jokingly” explained to me how homosexual men are weak, perverted and come from a “backwards” village called Gjakova. My anxiety expressed in my journal entry was a result of confronting homophobic behaviours in the workplace.

Being an adult educator in Kosovo is not entirely a novel concept in the field of international development. Kosovo, like many other developing nations, are often introduced to different types of foreign adult educators who leave their home country, like Canada, to teach adults on particular subject matter (Ment, 2005). Often there is a pre-departure orientation, but this is not always the case. In order to prepare adult educators who wish to teach abroad, development aid agencies, such as non-governmental organizations or certain government departments often offer pre-departure orientations in order to make the transition to working in a foreign culture a smooth process. Pre-departure orientations consist of necessary training on language, cultural, and political differences (Birch & Miller, 2005). While pre-departure orientations have been proven helpful to create successful transitions, which, in turn, contribute to the success of the overseas venture, they place minority adult educators into a particular quandary. Chiefly, pre-departure orientations set the tone for the work and life abroad. Adult educators who are receiving pre-departure training look toward their training leaders for expertise, support, and mentorship in the same ways that the educator’s students would look toward the educator for guidance and instruction. If crucial perspectives were left out, such as how to navigate a gay male identity in the classroom, then certain social identities would be placed at a disadvantage that could negatively impact teaching practices, student-teacher relationships, and curriculum.

For the purposes of this paper, I plan to use preliminary findings from my dissertation research that examines how non-governmental organizations are addressing sexual identity-difference in their pre-departure orientations. While sexual identity-difference is the vehicle in which I discuss the topic at hand, I hope this research would be useful to a) adult educators who find themselves navigating their identity-difference in their transnational adult learning scenarios, and b) to non-governmental organizations that are looking for ways to make their pre-departure orientations more relevant to individuals working abroad in developing countries. The research question which drives this part of my dissertation research is: What (if any) sexual identity training and field support do foreign gay male adult educators receive in order to assist them with, and possibly shape, their assignment to in a Muslim country? I chose Islam because there has been a wide array of research that speaks to how homosexuality is considered a deviant sexual identity according to Islam, which, in turn, has socially excluded many lives of people who engage in same-sex relations from experiencing entitled citizenship and cultural rights (Sardar & Davies, 2004).

**Theoretical Orientation: Adult Learning Theory**

I understand that adult learning theory is a theoretical orientation that lays out the requirements in order for adults to acquire a deeper understanding of particular knowledge, skills and attitudes. In order to successfully learn the necessary content and skills, the learning goals and objectives of any knowledge-transfer exercise must be made realistic, relevant and important to them. Further, adults require direct and concrete learning experiences that connect to real-life work situations. Coaching and other kinds of follow-up ensure that adults are integrating into their new
workplace responsibilities and tasks, which in turn requires a supportive commitment to the adult learner (Freire, 1988; Knowles, 1984). Lastly, adult educators need to take into consideration the socio-cultural landscape when planning and instructing curricula (Jarvis, 1987).

Generally speaking, just as local counterparts are accountable to the foreign educator, the foreign educator is also answerable to aid agencies (Preston, 1996). The foreign gay male adult educator may hesitate to challenge the “status quo” by seeking support or advice out of fear of costing himself other employment opportunities or important promotions (Preston, 1996). Existing research into the obligations of aid agencies centre around adult learning principles, and more specifically, emphasize training and supporting the foreign adult educator prior to and during the time abroad (Verhelst, 1997). There are two reasons for this. First, since individuals come from vastly different cultures, their awareness of each others’ differences should be enhanced so that welcoming environments may be created and clear policies and programs are put into place (Verhelst, 1997). Mendenhall & Oddou (1985) state that pre-departure training should consist of:

a) self-orientation, which is focused on building up personal resilience, b) other-orientation, which is about building positive interactions and relationships in the host nations, and c) perceptual-orientation, which is focused on understanding and knowing the views of a variety of cultures (p. 228).

With this in mind, the training of adult educators clearly needs to be approached from various orientations so that the educators feel comfortable asking important questions and, as a result, experience a smoother transition.

Second, because being overseas and away from familiar supports and resources can cause a great deal of stress and loneliness (Britt & Adler, 1999), adult educators need to feel confident about their decision so that they will not become overwhelmed when they begin working abroad. Social lives and practices cannot be checked at the border, and training leaders need to recognize that particular individuals will be looking for useful mentorship and support in certain areas. By excluding identity-differences within training and support systems, there is a greater chance of failure abroad due to the enhanced level of difficulty in adapting to new local cultures (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985).

**Research Methodology**

Jenny Ozga (2000) purports that education research, “should not be confined to the ‘useful’ or to research that improves pupil performance” (p. 5). She asserts that policy research in educational settings are useful to educators because, “of its capacity to inform their own policy directions and to encourage autonomous, critical judgment of government policy” (p. 5). With this in mind, I approach pre-departure orientations as templates for educational policy in aid agencies. Policy research in this manner informs me on what steps are (not) being taken by organizations in the areas of extending anti-discrimination policies to consider the lives of gay male adult educators who work overseas, and necessary intercultural training policies and procedures for both the educator and learner to improve relationships and teaching practices.

To facilitate this, I approached training team leaders from three aid agencies that work in Muslim countries, and carry a mandate to offer subject-centred training to certain professionals (e.g. teachers, physicians, police officers) as part of their development agenda. Interviews were conducted with human resource professionals or training team leaders either by phone or email. In each interview, I investigated how helpful, or not, the pre-departure orientations are for gay male adult educators being sent abroad to a Muslim country. In a broader sense, I made inquiries
into how sexuality is included in the pre-departure orientation, given how sexuality is understood differently everywhere (Herdt, 1997). For instance, do pre-departure orientations teach about strict roles of masculinity in the foreign culture, and, concurrently, suggest that “wives” accompany the male adult educator? Approaching the research in this manner will help ascertain how sexual identity-difference issues are considered among development agencies.

**Initial Findings & Analysis**

In two interviews, participants revealed that sexuality was not a particular training topic in their pre-departure orientations. Sexuality only becomes an afterthought in pre-departure orientations when such information is requested by “out” sexual minority adult educators, most likely in the form of one-on-one training or self-directed learning. This is problematic in two ways. First, training leaders rely on the training recipient’s own resources to cover knowledge gaps. However, I argue that by relying on self-directed learning to understand how to navigate sexual-difference in the workplace, there is a missed opportunity on behalf of the aid agency to send a strong message of support inclusive support to minorities, especially when it comes to discussing such sensitive matters as sexuality. Further, for an aid agency to include sexual difference in pre-departure orientations means to transcend heteronormative ways of thinking. By heteronormativity I mean the perceived belief that heterosexuality is superior to same-sex identities and practices, and that this belief plays out in policies, curricula, conversations, and everyday practices in a way that renders non-heterosexual identities as being subversive and deviant. As a result, cross-sex relations become the only legitimate option for obtaining success and happiness (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2007). While the foreign culture might understand sexuality in heteronormative ways, the fact that adult educators come from plural societies that appreciate sexual diversity should not be overlooked as well.

Second, being “out” creates a precarious situation whereby training leaders require “out” identities in order to create legitimacy in curricula, yet individuals who choose not to reveal the non-normative nature of their sexual identity might be left at a disadvantage. I argue that regardless of how someone identifies in the classroom, there needs to be a concentrated effort to include such sexual identity-difference issues in training curricula so that a) those who are not “out”, or might be questioning, can still receive vital information, and b) other participants can learn about sexuality issues, support their gay male colleagues, and tackle their own sexuality-differences while living abroad.

One participant revealed that anti-homophobic behaviour and language is included in anti-oppression training, but there is no structured training program on sexuality. In this specific situation, the training leader identified as “queer” but did not want to place herself in harm’s way. She explained, “As a queer supervisor, I sometimes find it difficult to maintain my own safety and remain calm and unbiased during situations which I find personally offensive and disrespectful.” Instead, she contracted an outside facilitator only when the adult learner requested specific information. This example reflects the fear that homophobia causes, and, in particular, how being an “out” staff member could draw inappropriate attention that some adult educators just do not want to risk.

While training was provided by all three aid agencies on Islam’s understanding of masculine and feminine roles, little training is offered on how Islam regards male homosexuality as weak, feminine, and deviant. Regardless of the educator’s sexual orientation, to exclude an explanation of Islam’s rules around sexuality in the pre-departure orientation risks an absence of sexuality as a consideration in the educator’s professional practice and life abroad. This absence
could result in awkward and tense moments for the educator. For example, while living in Kosovo, Albanian Muslim men would want to “link arms” and greet me with a head-to-head gesture. A Western adult educator who is unfamiliar with such homosocial behaviours might misunderstand this behaviour as a sexual advance, rather than as a sign of friendship.

During my data collection, I also inquired into what kind of training or guidance is provided to assist a gay male adult educator who experiences violence in the classroom or, in his personal life. One participant reported that this situation has not been considered in their organization’s security protocol, and could not report on what would take place. Another participant felt that this was not an issue for their organization to consider and/or should have been investigated by the training recipient before the training. Lastly, the third participant felt that a series of anti-homophobia workshops in the community would be needed to discuss the issue at hand. What was most indicative to these responses was the background of the aid agency. The participant who suggested delivering anti-homophobia workshops represents an organization with a social justice mandate that engages with Freirian principles of popular education.

However, the other two organizations understood training from a more human capital theoretical perspective, which is problematic because such an approach is riddled with inequities, independence and markets to serve a small few (Baptiste, 2001). Despite providing training sessions that are participatory in nature, the purpose of the pre-departure orientation, according to these two organizations, are to introduce the general challenges to living abroad which would affect the majority and not the minority. Addressing security concerns as they relate to gay men simply is not a “majority” issue for these two organizations. In this sense, I argue that choosing to ignore issues facing sexual minorities could be viewed as an attempt to “screen out” sexual minorities from enjoying such work opportunities. To reject creating a safe and caring working environment in consultation with sexual minorities reflects a historical practice of social exclusion that sexual minorities are well familiar with. While “sexual orientation” has been largely accepted in many human rights policies, heteronormativity continues to be a pervasive element in day-to-day operations of particular organizations.

Finally, two study participants reported that there was a great deal of stress revealed by gay male adult educators upon their re-entry into their home country. Re-entry debriefing sessions are useful to the training leader who facilitates pre-departure orientation because s/he could learn how to improve the pre-departure orientation. In one example, one adult educator, who was also a gay activist in his home country, reported that he returned home with a “crushed spirit” and had lost his will to carry on his activist agendas because he was living in a “closet” for such a long time. In another example, a gay professional reported that he was quick to express anger and frustration while living abroad and believed this was a result of hiding his sexuality throughout his placement. The study participant explained:

When he returned and after some reflection, he concluded that he was excessively frustrated and angry with his colleagues and counterparts overseas as a result of his decision to remain silent about his sexual identity. He explained that he projected his frustration onto others and as a consequence, he felt that he was not as effective overseas. He shared that his reactions to perceived discrimination of minority groups overseas were intensified by his own experiences as a minority.

While the training leader was sympathetic to these experiences, sexuality still remains an afterthought. I think there is a missed opportunity here. Pre-departure orientations are designed to, among several things, communicate to the adult educator what to expect in the host country,
how to adapt to certain customs and attitudes, and how to manage stress and culture shock (Kohls, 1996), all of which cut across sexuality. I argue that by ignoring sexuality within these important discussions or by reducing sexuality to an afterthought not only minimizes the importance of how sexuality shapes adult learning experiences, but also further marginalizes sexual minorities. As a result, adult educators acquire impaired understandings about how to address sexuality issues in their classrooms and workplace. Adult educators then lose out on gaining important knowledge that explains how sexuality is grappled with in adult learning scenarios abroad.

**Concluding Summary**

Heteronormativity can cause certain educators to reject certain professional opportunities, and increasingly so when such normative behaviours are institutionally sanctioned (Hill, 2006). Therefore, openness, inclusivity, and respect across sexual difference need to be considered as an essential component in preparing for and supporting difference in adult educators. Just as the growing number of single, young women going abroad to work in developing nations has prompted gender training in the pre-departure orientation, the growing emergence of sexual minorities working abroad should prompt a closer examination of sexuality. If training was received, gay male adult educators would be a more ready position to decide how to navigate his sexuality, or make preparations in case he is unwillingly “outed” in his classroom. However, as this preliminary study revealed, accommodations made to gay male adult educators largely have taken place because these particular gay men were “out” about their sexuality that leads to specific concerns about what happens when no one “speaks out”. Working and living abroad in a foreign country can provide many meaningful opportunities for growth and learning, however, experiences with sexuality could create problems for the adult educator if s/he is not provided with appropriate training.

**References**


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A teaching qualification is a passport to an international professional career: the global teacher is found in more and more classrooms around the world today. It is a two-way movement. This book looks at the growing importance of immigrant teachers in western countries today and at teachers who exit from western countries (emigrant teachers) seeking teaching experience in other countries. Through a series of in-depth interviews with eight gay male aid workers and an analysis of official texts, the author's findings suggest that institutions operate on heteronormative values that may explain why troubling encounters occur in the workplace. As a result, study participants must navigate through these encounters without much support, information, or direction from the agency. Pre-departure orientation (PDO) is a critical part of your Program. It is comprised of several activities. All PDO activities are mandatory and must be completed by the established deadlines. It can be helpful to remember this when feeling out of sync with your surroundings. It's not just me—Most travelers experience culture shock at some level when traveling. If you talk with your peers, you are likely to find that they are feeling some of the same things that you are. Left untreated, culture shock can turn your program into a miserable experience. Being able to identify culture shock and manage it effectively will help you enjoy the cultural challenges of learning abroad. Other Resources for Preparation. The best travelers are well-informed!