Cross-cultural learning

I knew very little about South Korea when I signed up to study abroad there for 6 weeks. During my time in this country, I have learned and experienced many different things, quite a few of which came from being in an unfamiliar culture. Many of my preconceived ideas about South Korea derived from the stereotypes that I had formed about Asian culture in general. However, the majority of those stereotypes were shattered within my first week here.

As a Kansan, I am hardwired to be courteous and respectful to those around me, even strangers. One aspect of that idea is holding the door open for someone when entering or exiting a building. This behavior ranges from waiting at the door for someone to enter, or simply reaching my arm back for someone directly behind me in a crowd. This behavior is automatic for me, and I often do not think about it. However, in Korean culture, holding the door open for someone is not very common, and when it is done, it has a different meaning other than out of respect. When a man holds a door open for a female, it has romantic meaning, and is often only seen in couples. With that in mind, many of the guys on the trip with me had to be conscious to not show that behavior towards the students, as it could be seen as inappropriate.

On my first day in the Middle School, I was introduced to the Korean norm of “bowing” as a greeting and sign of respect. Many of the students would bow to me in the hallways while also saying “hello teacher”. Though bowing is considered to be a greeting, similar to the handshake used in the U.S., it has many more rules associated with it. When I first experienced this, I thought it was expected for me to bow back to them, but I quickly learned the hierarchical meaning behind bowing, as well as the dos and don’ts that come along with that. Korean culture has a very hierarchal and patriarchal structure, which means that the social aspects are very complex in many situations. While in the school, I was placed at a social standing amongst the other teachers, which meant that I would bow to them and those that are above me, such as the principal and vice principal. However, because I was considered to be ranked above the students, I did not need to bow to them. Though bowing is considered to be a greeting, similar to the handshake used in the U.S., it has many more rules associated with it.

One of the major adjustments that I needed to make while in South Korea was to my eating habits. Since we ate many of our meals at the school cafeteria, I was able to see what it was like to eat a typical Korean meal. Each meal that we had was made of several portions, but was always the same pattern: Rice, meat, soup, vegetables, dessert (fruit or yogurt drink), and kimchi. At first I was not able to eat all of the food at every meal, especially all of the meat. During breakfast, the food is usually the same as what could be served at lunch or dinner, which is very different from what I am used to. American breakfast is very different from lunch and dinner, and it is categorized by its own specific food contents. Though both South Korea and the United States place an emphasis on eating a big breakfast as fuel for the day, the meals that are eaten for each are very different, which was an adjustment for me. Another difficulty I faced while eating, was the lack of water or any drinks available. Koreans believe that drinking while eating is bad for digestion, so there is usually not water available during meals. However, they supplement that with the presence of soup as a means of hydration. Each meal I ate had soup as one of the courses.

My experience with the Korean school systems made and my interpretation of such may be viewed as a form of ethnocentrism. Starting as early as middle school, students are expected to be constantly studying and working on school work. Even the school day is longer; Kyunghwa high school is from 8am-5, whereas my high school was from 8am -3pm. After school the students have mandatory study time until 11pm, leaving little room for free time. The focus of the schools is also on test scores, which increases the amount of stress the students feel to study. When I was observing these patterns of behavior, I was appalled at these expectations, comparing it to my own education experience. Some of these patterns derive from the hierarchal structure of this society, which remains intact due to the harsh standards and expectations that leave little room for failure. I once heard a student say “there is no point if I did well on this test because someone else did better”. In order to achieve success, you must not only be good at what you do, but you must be better than everyone else. The high sense of competition was also shocking to me, because American culture has taken such a strong shift towards creating equal and supportive environments. Overall, my views on Korean education could be viewed as a form of ethnocentrism, but I believe that the school system is too harsh on the students.

Though there have been many aspects that have contributes to my culture shock, many of those factors are also part of what made me fall in love with Korean culture. I have been given the opportunity to view the world from a new perspective, and it was a privilege to experience. I have now learned to take off my shoes when I enter a room, eat with chopsticks, never flush toilet paper, and greet people with a bow. For those reasons and many more, I have found that South Korea is a beautiful place filled with people that have changed my life.

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