

Knowledge Diplomacy in Small Culture Observations

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Abstract

Knowledge diplomacy has gained increasing traction as a goal for global higher education. Given its current construction, knowledge diplomacy has a focus on the role of higher education institutions in building formal global connectivity for common global good. This position paper argues for the inclusion of students' education abroad programming as an important part of knowledge diplomacy for its individual and informal contribution to improving international relations and intercultural understanding. To achieve knowledge diplomacy through education abroad experiences, international educators need to guide students in small culture observations overseas as a mechanism to break down cultural stereotyping and to build cultural appreciation.

Keywords: humanistic, international education, goal, knowledge diplomacy, small cultures

Knowledge diplomacy has been increasingly promoted as a goal of higher education internationalization to improve international relations and world peace. This essay draws attention to the importance of student-level knowledge diplomacy in the form of education abroad programming. It will first discuss the origins and meanings of knowledge diplomacy, followed by a review on how knowledge diplomacy is situated within the larger context of global higher education. In addition to existing literature on the benefits of education abroad programs as a form of knowledge diplomacy, the paper draws on data from two cases of education abroad programs between Canada and China to argue that, to achieve knowledge diplomacy, international education programs need to disrupt essentialized “big culture” stereotypes and focus on nuanced “small culture” observations.

Knowledge Diplomacy

The concept of knowledge diplomacy has been around for over two decades. It was first used in the context of protecting a country's intellectual property (i.e. knowledge) through trade agreements (i.e. diplomacy) (Ryan, 1998). When applied to higher education, knowledge diplomacy is seen as higher education's role to advance a country's soft

power in international relations (Ogunnubi & Shawa, 2017). Soft power is a concept developed in the late 1980s to refer to one country's ability to secure national self-interest by influencing the behavior of other countries through attraction and persuasion rather than military action or economic coercion (Nye, 2004). To advance a country's national interest, higher education in Western countries has been increasingly used as a way to enhance a country's economic advantage and political influence through its global operations (Lomer, 2017).

However, the adverse effects of unchecked and unrestrained pursuit of national interests seem to have reached a critical tipping point today, as indicated by global warming, a global pandemic, refugee crises, and Trumpism (Liu, 2021a). To help address these common global challenges that threaten our very existence, there needs to be an ethical turn for global higher education practices (e.g. de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Liu, 2022; Liu, 2023). In this context, knowledge diplomacy has been redefined and re-advocated by scholars in international higher education, no longer as a nationalistic and competitive construct, but as a collaborative and mutually beneficial goal that higher education institutions should pursue. As Knight (2020) wrote,

Knowledge diplomacy is a new approach to understanding the role of international higher education in strengthening relations among countries and addressing common global challenges (p 38).

Higher education internationalization can serve many different goals (Stier, 2004). At the individual level, it can serve the goal of preparing students with intercultural competences to function in the global workplace. At the national level, it is often taken as a means to compete and succeed in the knowledge economy. At the global level, international education can be seen as a force for social transformation and equitable development. However, the three goals are not generally pursued in a balanced manner. All countries attach importance to the individual educational goal for student training, but after that, the national competitive goal has often taken priority over the global transformational goal. The international activities of higher education have been increasingly motivated by economic profits rather than by either government policy or goodwill (Yang, 2002). Some more important values such as cooperation, peace and mutual understanding have been pushed to the side for the purpose of competition, revenue, and reputational gain (de Wit, 2020). For this reason, knowledge diplomacy has captured people's attention and imagination as an idealistic and global transformative construct in global higher education that aims to improve international relations, to address common global issues, to narrow the gap of rich and poor, and to contribute to peaceful and equitable development (Knight, 2019; 2020).

Education Abroad as Knowledge Diplomacy

The current definition of knowledge diplomacy has a clear focus on the role of higher education institutions in developing formal global networks and partnerships for mutual benefits and global public good. The international mobility of individual students and scholars is not believed to "necessarily constitute knowledge diplomacy" (Knight, 2020, p. 38). It is understandable to have high expectations out of higher education institutions for their role in promoting diplomatic relations, as they are large organizations with tremendous resources and the potential to develop and nurture global partnerships and networks. Education abroad has been indeed seen traditionally as an activity in international education to fulfill students' global learning goals, such as academic outcomes, cultural competence, and employability development (Tran et al., 2021). However, many scholars in international education have paid attention to the role of informal, individual-level outcomes in education abroad contexts as a contribution to knowledge diplomacy.

Parsons (2010) finds that students who participate in education abroad programs demonstrate a decrease in xenophobia, fear, or ethnic distance. Jones (2014) observes that study abroad experiences contribute to students' feeling of enlightened nationalism and appreciation for differences. Kitamura (2015) sees knowledge diplomacy as a result of individuals developing a better understanding of the world and then undertaking leadership roles in political, economic

and cultural arenas later on in their lives. Asada (2018) believes in knowledge diplomacy as individuals' improved intercultural competences and improved understanding of their roles in the world. Wu and Zha (2018) note that knowledge diplomacy is a result of all citizens moving from a narrow view focusing on their home countries to reflecting upon how they may contribute to the wider world and international community. Tran, Bui & Nguyen's (2021) study delineates four main forms of youth agency in relation to knowledge diplomacy during education abroad: fostering regional understandings, people-to-people connections, people-to-opportunities connections, and country-to-country connections. Based on an evaluation of the long-term impact of education abroad experiences (over 50 years), Asada (2021) finds that study abroad activities increase connectivity between countries and regions, and thus contribute to knowledge diplomacy.

Knowledge diplomacy should be considered a goal-oriented construct, not an actor-focused or an activity-focused construct, so that it becomes an inclusive notion, recognizing all actors and activities' contributions, big and small, short-term and long-term. Students' education abroad experiences have a dualist role when informal individual-level outcomes connect to the macro level of social good (Asada, 2021). For this reason, instead of only relying on institutions of higher education to foster relations between countries, individual students and scholars in mobility programs should be purposefully mobilized as an instrument to achieve knowledge diplomacy and mutual appreciation (Varpahovskis, 2021). It is important to see students and scholars in international mobility as global citizens and leaders, and to recognize their grassroots people-to-people diplomatic engagement in contributing to international relations.

Small Culture Observations

Based on the above review of literature, we can see the connection between students' education abroad experiences and knowledge diplomacy, but the mechanism that enables this connection to happen has not been explicitly discussed. Bacon famously stated that knowledge is power, either hard power or soft power, and Foucault (1980) forcibly pointed out that power is often used to control and define knowledge. Knowledge and power are two highly interwoven constructs, so much so that neutral, uncommitted, and apolitical knowledge does not exist (Freire, 1970). It is an undisputed fact that we are living in a highly unequal world structure where a few Western industrialized countries in the global north dominate the global knowledge system (Altbach, 2015). The Anglo-Western hegemony of knowledge gives dominant power to countries in the global north (Heleta, 2022) and the postcolonial pattern of power defines knowledge production in countries in the global south (Stein et al., 2020). Knowledge has been used as a tool to gain hegemonic power, leading to imbalanced development between nations in the first place. Therefore, one could reasonably ask: how knowledge can be mobilized as a politically and ideologically neutral tool for strengthening relations among countries and addressing common global challenges in the context of education abroad experiences?

A search for a theoretical framing that connects education abroad and knowledge diplomacy in this project has landed on the concept of small cultures put forward by interculturalist Adrian Holiday (1999), to contrast with the concept of large culture. Based on this distinction, the large culture, the default notion of culture, refers to national or ethnic cultures. A good example of the large culture is Hofstede's (1982) cultural dimensions used to characterize different national cultures along a number of binary lines, such as individualistic vs collectivistic, ambiguity tolerance vs uncertainty avoidance, low social hierarchy vs high social hierarchy, task orientation vs people orientation, and indulgent vs restraint. According to these binary dimensions, Canada would be an individualistic country, China a collective one; Canadians would be more ambiguity tolerant, and Chinese folks would tend to avoid uncertainty; Canada would have a weaker social hierarchy, while Chinese social hierarchy would be stronger; Canadians are more task oriented, while the Chinese more people orientated; and the Canadians are more indulgent and take life easy, while the Chinese show more restraint and just can't seem to relax and take it easy.

These generalized cultural patterns are not necessarily wrong, and they are rather important to people who are very new to cross-cultural experiences. But these binary divisions of cultures in big culture thinking have major limitations. In the first place, the handful of cultural dimensions used to characterize different national cultures are not able to give credit to the complexity and depth within each. Each national culture is complex and nuanced enough to defy the characterization of these few indicators. A more important and more dangerous limitation with the handful of cultural dimensions is that they tend to carry hidden value judgments, with qualities associated with one's own culture often covertly considered to be "better" qualities. For instance, some people in the Western world may be led to believe that individualism is better than collectivism, as it drives creation and innovation; low hierarchy between people is better than high power distance, as it gives rise to democracy; and ambiguity tolerance is better, as it gives people the opportunity to discover new knowledge. As such, these national cultural dimensions have been used as convenient tools to construct a postcolonial power structure that otherizes and even cancels knowledge, wisdom and discourses of the global south.

Global higher education is obligated to uncover the unequal power dynamics and work to transform them in order to serve the larger purpose of restoring global racial justice and indigenous knowledge systems (Yosso, 2005). To correct the limitations of big culture thinking, Holiday (1999) believes that it is beneficial to focus more on small cultures within each national/ethnic culture. Small cultures refer to small social groupings and activities wherever there is cohesive pattern of behavior (Holiday, 1999) and the focus on small cultures can best embrace cultural complexity and avoid cultural stereotyping. With regard to international learning, it would be more important for students to realize the complexity within each large culture, to avoid sweeping cultural stereotypes, and to acquire the ability to detect, define and demystify nuanced small cultures within a large ethnic culture (Liu et al., 2022). Small culture observations are the mechanism to achieve knowledge diplomacy in the education abroad context, as they can penetrate through ideologically inclined big culture differences to focus on common humanistic experiences. In other words, knowledge diplomacy can be achieved at the people-people level by nuancing students' prior and potentially biased perceptions through small culture observations.

Kneeling Buses, Friendly Greetings, and the Normal People

To explore the value of small culture observations as a theoretical lens for knowledge diplomacy in education abroad contexts, we re-examined the data of two international mobility programs between Canada and China. One of the two programs is the Global Academic Leadership Development (GALD) Program, a three-month long professional development program for mid-level Chinese university leaders in Canada (Liu, 2021b). Since 2012, over 900 participants from about 300 universities have completed this program. Reversing the direction of mobility, the second program is called the Canada Learning Initiative in China (CLIC), a consortium of 12 top Canadian research-intensive universities formed to increase Canadian students' participation in study abroad in Chinese partner universities (Huang & Liu, 2023). The program has supported over 850 Canadian students to pursue their study abroad opportunities in China since 2016. Both programs are large-scale high-profile programs, involving a big number of students and scholars from both countries. Due to some major ideological differences and occasional political tensions between the two countries, the experiences of students in Sino-Canadian two-way mobility programs are especially relevant for understanding the potential of knowledge diplomacy. We asked the following questions: To what extent have students' education abroad experiences in these two programs strengthened the understanding and relationship between the two countries at the people-to-people level? Have small culture observations enabled the participants of these two programs to develop a more positive attitude toward their host countries and their host countries' people?

While in Canada, the Chinese visitors in the GALD leadership program observed the humanistic and caring culture in Canada beyond the university campus, including:

(...) kneeling buses to provide accessibility of public facilities to the disabled; people talking more quietly in public; holding doors for people coming behind; saying hi to strangers; standing to the right on escalators; saying thanks to bus drivers; and saying “sorry” all the time (Liu, 2019, p 317).

They would even feel guilty when Canadian drivers stopped their cars to let them cross the road, as one visitor wrote:

I would run to save the driver’s time. If cars do this in China, they won’t go anywhere for a whole day, as there are so many people. [...] And Canadians are so friendly. They always smile and say hi. Again in China, you won’t be able to do that. There are just too many people on the street (Liu, 2021 b, p 623).

While studying in China, young Canadian students in the CLIC program, still with many language barriers, bravely ventured off campus to explore the country. One student wrote:

I never felt uncomfortable going out by myself, even when I left the big cities and went to explore China’s rural areas. I went to Shanghai. I went camping on the Great Wall. I went hiking. As a young woman from a Western country, I never dreaded traveling on my own. I never felt insecure or came across issues I couldn’t deal with. I didn’t lose my calm even when I missed my train back to Beijing. With the help of Tik Tok and a translation app, I purchased my ticket for the next train (Huang & Liu, 2023, p 7).

Their positive experiences in China made them reflect on some of the negative portraits of China in the media before they went:

I notice the negative images of China perpetuated by Western media, but I encountered people with the same dreams and aspirations as anyone else. In China, I met normal people trying to earn a degree, hold down a job, and raise a family (Huang & Liu, 2023, p 11).

These observations are small but powerful, as they serve as good evidence of knowledge diplomacy taking place. These small observations based on lived experiences overseas show students/scholars’ increased awareness of the demographic, economic and cultural contexts of both countries. These small observations help promote cultural understanding, instill an enlightened sense of nationalism, and reduce ethnic distance and apprehension. These small observations also give students and scholars a deeper appreciation of each other’s people with a focus on similarities and common destinies instead of differences and competition. These person-to-person, people-to-people level of knowledge diplomacy, reflected in cultural understanding of each other and humanist fondness toward each other, is the immediate impact of education abroad experiences, with the potential for long-term benefits of increased international and inter-regional connectivity, as found in Asada's (2021) longitudinal study.

Discussion

The global transformative goal of international higher education, as expressed in the concept of knowledge diplomacy, is to strengthen international relations, promote world peace, and solve common world problems (Knight 2019; 2020). In this paper, I have discussed how education abroad programming can be mobilized to contribute to knowledge diplomacy. Education abroad is not always a rosy picture. There is a danger of shallow experiences and even strengthened cultural stereotypes for students if it is not done properly (Liu et al., 2022). Universities’ neoliberal internationalization policies can also reinforce cultural racism and Western supremacy, and thus reproduce existing

inequities (Changamire et al., 2022). For these reasons, carefully planned activities, meaningful interactions, and scaffolded reflections need to be done to increase chances of intercultural learning (Williams, 2005). More importantly, serious considerations need to be given to what theoretical framing we should adopt to help develop students' awareness of the postcolonial world condition, equitable values, and empathetic actions (Liu, 2022). The ultimate goal is to turn them into global citizens and global leaders with a strong dedication to contribute to knowledge diplomacy and make a positive change in the world.

Physically immersive experiences overseas help individuals perceive the richness, sophistication, and nuance of another culture, and thus shake and deconstruct the previously held cultural stereotypes that tend to otherize alien cultures (Liu et al., 2022). Therefore, I have argued in this essay that small culture observations beyond the established big cultural dimensions serve as the mechanism for knowledge diplomacy in the context of education abroad programs. In other words, small culture observations are the best tools to achieve knowledge diplomacy during education abroad. To achieve the goal of knowledge diplomacy, small culture observations need to be based on people's first-hand lived experiences overseas. To achieve knowledge diplomacy, international education programs need to guide students in moving beyond large culture categories and focusing on small culture observations that reflect people's common humanistic experiences. Such observations need to avoid a simplistic interpretation through normative categories. Students need to hold a humble attitude toward each culture, refraining from a quick value judgment. They need to take each culture as a legitimate system in its own right. They need to demonstrate a willingness to immerse themselves in a new culture, to go beyond what is visible, and to research the structural reasons behind observable cultural practices and behaviors.

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