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Who Am I? Reflecting on a Personal Journey of Self-Authorship

Laura Vaughn

Florida State University, United States of America

ABSTRACT

This reflective paper shares the experiences of a higher education professional living and working abroad and the long-term impacts of those experiences on their self-authorship journey through reflection ten years later. The story of this reflection focuses on how cultural differences and community ties helped to facilitate growth and self-confidence through navigating the challenges and complexities of living abroad in a culture with differing conventions. The paper concludes by sharing how reflecting on self-authorship during and after international experiences can help develop personal identities both as an individual and within a collective.

Keywords: self-authorship, narrative reflection, cultural adjustment, international education, individualism vs. collectivism

It was a hot and humid August day in 2011 when I got off the bus outside of the Gunma Prefectural Office with several other soon to be assistant language teachers (ALTs) recruited by the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program. We would soon go into local public schools and be an encouragement for K-12 students to learn and practice English. We all came from a variety of countries and backgrounds, and we would all be going into a variety of schools ranging from elementary schools in the mountains to high schools in the city. Gunma is considered to be rather rural and most foreigners have never even heard the prefecture's name. I had just graduated from my undergraduate institution with a degree in International Business and no idea what I wanted to do in life; however, that would slowly change.

The various experiences I had during my time abroad were challenging, yet allowed me to develop my own voice when I was uncertain of my future path. I ended up staying on the JET Program for two years, a time that allowed me to

reflect on myself and my career goals. Looking back on my time in Japan almost ten years later, I can honestly say those two years were some of the most important for my own personal development, and reflection has allowed me to think on what I have learned about myself and my relationships with others. Without the experiences I had living and working in Japan, I likely would not have ended up in the field of international education. This field is where I have found my passion for student development, and student development theories such as Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship, along with theories on reflection, provided me with frameworks that gave me the inspiration to dive deeper into my own experiences while abroad.

SELF-AUTHORSHIP THEORY

Self-authorship is defined as the capacity of a person to decide their own beliefs, identity, and social relations (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Self-authorship has three overarching dimensions: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Findings by Baxter Magolda (2001, 2014) from a longitudinal study on college students led to the identification of four linear phases within each of the three dimensions which guide the way to self-authorship:

- *Following Formulas*: a young adult will copy the ideas of external authorities and societal expectations in order to gain approval of others.
- *Crossroads*: an individual starts to question how they have defined themselves based on expectations.
- *Becoming the Author of One's Life*: an individual chooses their own beliefs based on self-reflection on themselves and their relations with others.
- *Internal Foundation*: individuals become grounded in their beliefs and are content with who they are as a person.

While the theory of self-authorship proved to be promising when applied to white populations from western cultures, other researchers initially testing the theory found it to be less applicable to more collectivist cultures (Torres, 2010; Weinstock, 2010; Pizzolato et al., 2012). Research on self-authorship development found that the intrapersonal dimension was not fully formed by the individual, but was often shaped by cultural socialization and relations with other people (Pizzolato et al., 2012). Although Western cultures might be viewed as more autonomous with their sense of self, less Western focused cultures were found to develop self through relationships with others (Pizzolato et al., 2012). Even though the theory of self-authorship was created in a way that focused on the individual, if reconsidered through a lens that values communal relationships when it comes to a sense of self, the theory can be important to the development of identity for many different cultural groups (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). Our own development as individuals and self-authors can reflect the people and cultures that surround us. Research on Chinese students, who are from a collectivist culture, found the students' self-authorship development aligned with

the model even if slightly differing paths were used (Bohon, 2015; Li & Broido, 2021). Bohon (2015) also found that the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions were more closely related than the original model suggested. Research on Black and Latin-American college students has shown that peer support and connections with those in their racial and ethnic community can help the student development of those from more collectivist cultures in an individualist environment (Arevalo et al., 2015; Carson, 2009). Although at first glance, self-authorship and collectivism might seem unrelated, looking at the concepts through an alternative lens shows that the two are more closely connected than they initially appeared in early research on the topic. Using reflection on my experiences as a white woman growing up in a Western culture, I have found that it was my relationships with others that helped me to build my own identity.

USING REFLECTION

There are many ways to utilize reflection in order to look back on what we have done in the past and adjust what we will do in the future based on what we have learned from those experiences. Volpe White et al. (2019) discusses six types:

- Contemplative: inner reflection through activities such as journaling or meditation
- Creative: uses artistic methods such as drawing, performing, or singing
- Digital: uses technology and social media through blogging or videos
- Discussion: conversation with others
- Narrative: development of stories through case studies, poetry, or creative writing
- Written: writing down reflections through journaling or digital portfolios

Immediately after my time abroad, I did not reflect on my experiences outside of surface level discussion. However, as the years went by, I found myself starting to practice more contemplative and written reflection on how my time in Japan shaped me into the person I am today. By talking with classmates and co-workers about my time abroad years later, my depth of discussion became deeper and I began to contemplate my time in Japan in a way that I had not right after I had returned. I started to reflect more deeply on how my time abroad made me more open minded to new experiences and how those who had not gone abroad were missing those unspoken understandings I had with those who had similar overseas experiences.

Utilizing a narrative reflection to look at my experiences with self-authorship during my time abroad has allowed me to more critically analyze myself as an individual and within a collective (Volpe White et al., 2020). Reflection combined with self-authorship allows for greater introspection of how I have grown over time and developed my own identity as a person who has the confidence within my own self-authorship to advocate for others.

LEARNING SELF-AUTHORSHIP WITHIN A COLLECTIVIST CULTURE

Moving to Japan was a culture shock I was not fully prepared to handle. Even though I had studied Japanese in my undergraduate studies and had done a study abroad in Tokyo for one summer, there is a big difference in knowing what to expect rationally and being fully thrown into a different culture. Japan is a more collectivist culture than the United States, which means people focus on the good of the group rather than the good of the individual. The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program (GLOBE) studies showcased the differences in how a society views collectivism within in-group (social) practices and within institutional (structural) practices (Gelfand et al., 2004). Out of 62 countries, Japan had the third highest score when it came to institutional practices of collectivism and scored around the middle for in-group collectivist practices; whereas, the United States scored around the middle for institutional practices and low for in-group practices (Gelfand et al., 2004). I had to learn how to navigate a culture that put high importance on the good of the institutional structure over the well-being of the individual. I heard the phrase “the nail that sticks out gets hammered down” many times from others living in Japan, and it was proven to be true as those of us who arrived on the bus that hot and humid August day started to adjust to our new lives. Some of my fellow ALTs came across cultural differences when it came to facial hair, neckline cuts, and expectations to conform to the exact expectations of teachers at their schools. Standards of professionalism were different for most of us and there were growing pains as we had to figure out what was and was not appropriate for the Japanese workplace.

How exactly did I develop my own self-authorship while living in a collectivist work culture? The building of my own self-authorship came from the support of those who came with me on the JET Program. We all participated in training sessions together which allowed us to get to know each other as a cohort. Through my JET Program cohort, I became involved with JomoJET which played a significant part in developing my self-authorship. JomoJET was a community service-based organization run by the prefectural office using volunteers from the JET Program. We would meet at least once a month to put together events and activities to help promote internationalization such as community game nights and visits to a local children's home. I was not given a direct "no" by my city supervisor when I asked to join, but I was constantly told that my job came first and that I did not need to do anything that would interrupt my work at my school. My principal and the teachers at my school had no conflict with my participation because I made sure that my duties with JomoJET would not clash with my work. However, the constant comments from the city supervisor made it clear that he disapproved of my activities with JomoJET because it did not fit into my expected job description. While it would have been easier for me to back down and not be a "trouble maker", I made the decision to follow my beliefs in the good that JomoJET was doing for the larger community and kept participating in the group. This example shows how different people can interpret what the collective good

is because it is socially constructed without a clear definition. While I viewed the collective good being the work I was doing with JomoJET, the city supervisor viewed the collective good as me being at the school at all times.

Looking at the self-authorship stages from Baxter-Magolda (2014) now, I might have thought that I was in the *Becoming the Author of One's Life* stage when going to Japan; however, the challenges I faced in Japan pushed me back to the *Crossroads* stage as I was faced with new cultural ideas and expectations. The focus on the good of the collective over the good of the individual forced me to re-evaluate my own actions at work. I might have wanted to use modern music in class when doing warmup song activities because I viewed using modern music as being more interesting for the students, but if the teacher did not want to change their plans, was it really worth it to push my own ideas? If I pushed, maybe I could do what I wanted to do, but my actions could hurt my relationship with that teacher in the long run. I had to learn how to distinguish when to push and when to relent. Sometimes it was better to keep the peace by backing off on an issue and sometimes the greater good would be to stay in an organization despite the disapproval of my supervisor. Finding that greater good can be subjective and not everyone will agree on the actions taken and that is okay.

Having more awareness of the impact of my actions on those around me made me more considerate of people when it came to cultural differences. The reflection of my identity allowed me to realize that I wanted to be someone who listened and worked to bridge gaps in differences among cultures. Some of the ALTs I worked with would share frustrations of their school experiences, and some would even actively push against cultural norms to get their way even if they caused strife. Reflecting on these actions several years later, I feel like those ALTs built more barriers for themselves by refusing to change or compromise in areas. Not only that, but if they are the first non-Japanese person someone in their school has met, then that initial impression can promote a negative image of all foreigners.

While I might not have paid attention to it at the time, the short-term impact of my time abroad was fairly obvious with how I gained more patience and understanding of cultural and language differences. Fast forward ten years, reflecting on this experience through a lens of self-authorship has allowed me to see the long-term impact my time abroad has had on my motivations and career. If I had not had that experience working in Japan, I likely would have never found a passion for international education and working to help international students transition to U.S. higher education, something that has motivated me to pursue a Ph.D. and contribute to the research on international students. There are serious barriers to international student engagement that are grounded in prejudice and racialization. My experiences in developing my own self-authorship have allowed for me to see the bigger picture and better advocate for the students I serve. There are times when you need to push through protests in order to advocate, but there are also times where it is better to re-adjust your method and try a different way. Navigating the differences in culture has allowed me to better navigate when to use each method. I thought I understood my identity before I went to Japan; however, during my time overseas I realized that my identity was still developing and that those years in Japan were what cemented how I viewed myself. My time

abroad put me into the internal foundation stage of self-authorship for the first time in my life as I was able to come to terms with the idea of collectivism vs. individualism being more nuanced than something dichotomous. After all, how we develop as individuals does tie back to our relationships with others in our culture and social groups (Pizzolato et al., 2012; Abes & Hernandez, 2016). We are not alone in building the foundations of who we are as people.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

My colleagues working in study abroad have discussed something called the "awesome problem" where they ask students who have gone abroad how their experience was and the students answer that it was "awesome" without any deep reflection on the experience. In international education, I feel like we as professionals also face something similar in that we do not discuss our own development as professionals through in-depth reflection. How did we get to our careers in international education? How did we find our self-authorship within our experiences? Reflecting on our developmental experiences allows us to better understand and connect to the international students we serve as they face their own developmental changes. Although Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship as it was originally written may not perfectly reflect the process of self-authorship for everyone, when approached from a broader perspective and interpretation, the model can be applicable to those from a wide selection of backgrounds. Self-authorship gives us general steps on how we develop as people: from copying what we see from our communities, to being introduced to new ideas, and coming to a point where we make decisions concerning our own sense of identity. In the almost decade since I lived in Japan, I have been able to reflect on lessons learned during my time abroad and how that impacts the decisions I make as an international educator. I hope my reflections can encourage others to also reflect on their own self-authorship journeys and the impact those journeys have on their lives and the lives of those they work with to support either personally or professionally.

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Author bio

LAURA VAUGHN, M.A., M.B.A., (she/her) is a Ph.D. student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Department at Florida State University and works as a graduate assistant with the Leadership Learning Research Center. Her fields of interest are exploring the intersections of international students and leadership along with international student development and engagement. Email: lvaughn3@fsu.edu
