Research Reflection: Cultural Learning Strategies

My introduction to the world of research was quite unexpected. During sophomore year, as a sophomore representative on the HSB, I connected with a graduate student, Ryuot Hashimoto, at a welcoming picnic HSB hosted. Through a conversation, he introduced me to the world of research with Dr. Sandell. Upon the revelation of this whole new sector of academia, I went home and registered for Dr Sandell's individual studies class (ELE 499). The research team consists of Dr. Elizabeth Sandell, a faculty member in the Elementary and Literacy Education Department; me, Yodahe Kebede, a student in the Economics Department; and Ryuto Hashimoto, M.S., from the Sociology Department. The class had other fellow students working on their own research topics at the time with the guidance of Dr Sandell and Ryuto. The title of my research project was, “Cultural Learning Strategies in Ethiopia and the United States Experienced by International Students at a Mid-size Midwestern University”.

The research responds to an interest in how cultural learning strategies in Ethiopia compare to those in the United States. The reason I found myself doing such research was due to the realization that I reached during my second year at MNSU, the difference between my studying strategies upon arrival to the United States and how it has drastically changed during my sophomore year. As an Ethiopian student myself and hearing other fellow Ethiopian students mention such change in their studying strategies paired with a large sample pool of Ethiopian international students at MNSU, I came to choose Ethiopia as my country of choice for this research.  Ethiopian students experience cognitive dissonance because their previous educational experiences are so different from the experiences they have in the United States.

The research employs a comprehensive content analysis to answer the question: How do cultural learning strategies in Ethiopia compare to those in the United States? Initially, our intention was to collect existing scholarly articles that directly discussed the similarities and differences between these two educational contexts. However, this approach yielded limited contextual information due to a scarcity of articles written specifically on the matter. Upon facing this hurdle as a first-time researcher, I was disheartened but through the advising of Dr Sandell and Ryuto I was informed it was a common occurrence in research. Consequently, we adapted our methodology. We worked as a team with our research advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Sandell, and TA Ryuto Hashimoto to prepare a literature review, using shared documents to systematically identify key information from the available sources, such as the purpose of each study, main points from discussion sections, and significant quotes.

To generate primary data, we then planned and conducted recorded interviews with currentEthiopian students enrolled in various majors at Minnesota State University, Mankato. These interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to understand the cultural learning differences the students experienced and to document the strategies they used to navigate and overcome related challenges during their university education.

During the analysis phase there were multi-step processes that moved from raw data to thematic findings. First, we transcribed the interview videos verbatim. Through a careful reading of the transcripts, we began coding the data, identifying recurring challenges mentioned across multiple interviewees. Most interviewees reported a common frustration that they only learned about key university resources long after they could have benefited from them. This coding process allowed us to see clear patterns in the obstacles students faced. Subsequently, we focused our analysis on the specific portions of the transcripts where students detailed their responses to these challenges. By coding these solution-oriented narratives, we were able to categorize the methods and strategies the students used to adapt and succeed. This systematic analysis of both the problems and the student-devised solutions formed the core of our research findings, and firsthand account of cross-cultural educational adaptation.

The main purpose for this research was to inform in coming international students of how to adjust to the learning culture in the United States as well as, inform educators in the United States to employ effective instruction that foster international students’ ability to work with people from diverse cultures in the United States. Upon finalizing my research, we concluded being open mind is crucial for the academic achievement of the Ethiopian international students. Additionally, being aware of available resources and having a good understanding of the differences in studying norms, which are often influenced by various teaching and examining methods, are important factors. International students who grasp these core principles will experience a more seamless and successful transition to college or university life in the United States. Additionally, Universities and colleges should emphasize the differences between infrastructure and facilities more prominently. This is because respondents often mentioned feeling unaware of the resources and events hosted by the university.

Personally, the primary objective of undertaking this research is to directly enhance my academic achievement in college and to build a foundational skill set that will prepare me for my future career in developmental economics. The process of identifying a problem, formulating hypotheses, and navigating the research provided me with an understanding of economic principles in a way that pure coursework cannot.

The leadership and collaborative research experience gained through this project will forever hold a special place in my heart and memory. The various meetings and brainstorming sessions with my research team were more than just guidance, but rather they served as a place to exercise and refine essential leadership skills. This involved mediating differing viewpoints, and synthesizing diverse ideas into a coherent research direction. These skills are practical competencies that can be directly implemented to any profession, particularly in the collaborative field of economic policy and research.

Having a good research-based understanding of cultural learning strategies is key for effectively engaging with diverse backgrounds, which is essential for development economics. The field is concerned with improving economic conditions in developing countries, each having unique historical, social, and cultural norms. A policy that is successful in one cultural/country context may fail in another if these aspects are ignored. Therefore, grasping how culture influences learning and adaptation is a necessary skill for fostering sustainable and respectful economic development. This research provides an understanding for how to have analytical approaches to specific cultural contexts which is needed to be a developmental economist.

The influence of this research has already begun to bear fruit in my professional life. My current position as an Associate Advisory for JEPA Africa is a direct outcome of the experience and credibility gained through working with Dr. Sandell on this research. During the interview and application process, I was able to point to this research as proof of my skills and capabilities to handle complex, analytical work. Through discussing the project's objectives, my specific contributions, and the conclusions we drew during the research, I was able to make my application stand out and secured my position on the Education and Health desk.

Soon while advancing into graduate school, this experience will be a critical asset for my graduate school aspirations. A strong graduate application in a field as competitive as developmental economics requires demonstrable research experience. This project provides a substantive narrative to highlight my skills in data analysis, critical thinking, and academic writing. It will serve as proof that I can undertake rigorous research, which significantly elevates my chances of being accepted into a top-tier program. Ultimately, the research skills, cultural competence, and practical experience from this research will foster my future professional endeavours as a developmental economist.