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Author

Gilliland, Betsy

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Benefits and Challenges of Supervising an International Practicum

In this reflective essay, I share my experiences as a US-based professor leading graduate students on a 2-month teaching practicum in northern Thailand. I describe the process of arranging the practicum in coordination with the host university and the challenges of teaching 2 teacher-education courses while also mentoring novice teachers and addressing cross-cultural issues. I discovered that leading a practicum in an international context required me to play multiple roles—as supervisor, professor, and personal mentor. The teachers encountered challenges but also experienced empowerment working in a foreign language context; they wrestled with cultural issues such as negotiating among their expectations as teachers, the university's demands, and my requirements from them as students. The international practicum setting means that teachers need to develop an understanding of a new culture and how they fit personally into that culture. Being far from home requires everyone—teachers and supervisors—to form a new community supporting each other and to redraw previously established professor-student boundaries.

Northeastern Thailand is a very different place from the Thailand most tourists experience. The Issan region is the country's agricultural heartland, where rice fields predominate, water buffalo wander freely on dirt roads, and few foreigners visit the hundreds of Buddhist temples throughout the region's cities and towns. University students in the region focus their studies on practical majors such as business administration, medicine, or agriculture. While few of these students intend to leave the region after graduation, they nonetheless study English as part of their course work. This is where my experience, as a professor of Second Language Studies at an American university, crossed paths with theirs.

In the summer of 2014, eight graduate students from the University of Hawai'i and I landed at the airport of a midsize city in north-eastern Thailand with little sense of what exactly we would be doing there beyond teaching English to university students and researching their learning.¹ Our contacts from Issan University (IU, pseudonym) picked us up at the airport with a comfortable university-owned bus and drove us to the campus on the outskirts of the city, stopping en route at a department store to buy food, supplies, and mobile phones. After a weekend on our own, the teachers met their respective departments and received their teaching assignments for the next two months.

This article reflects on my experiences as a US-based professor leading graduate students on a teaching practicum in northern Thailand. This experience differed from other teaching practicum programs, in which novice teachers are paired with experienced teachers as apprentices in existing classrooms or work in Intensive English Programs on their home university campuses (Crookes, 2003). In our case, practicum participants were solely responsible for developing and teaching their own 45-hour English for Academic Purposes courses for groups of 15-25 Thai undergraduates. Before we arrived in Thailand, we had only a vague idea of the students' language-proficiency level or the desired outcomes for the courses. Classes started the day after the teachers met their departmental colleagues, so they had little time to conduct needs analysis or search for the perfect curriculum before heading into their classrooms and facing their students independently.

The other distinct feature of this practicum was that, while living and working in an international location, the teachers also took two graduate courses from me: one focused on instructional and reflective practices and the other guiding them in action research projects emerging from their teaching. After two predeparture sessions, the teaching course met weekly during our two months in Thailand to discuss common practicum-related issues, such as reflective teaching, materials development, and classroom management. I designed the course as a hybrid, where in addition to seminar meetings, some credit hours were gained through individual tutorial sessions and small-group conferences. The action research course likewise occurred half during the time in Thailand and half during the fall semester in Hawaii.

The Teachers

The eight graduate students who participated in the practicum had a wide range of backgrounds and teaching experience. Seven had

finished one to two years of course work in the MA in Second Language Studies Program, while the eighth (Orn) was a PhD student in our department who had earned an MA in Applied Linguistics in Australia. Their previous teaching experience ranged from none (Alex and Yukari) to 17 years (Hyunjung), working with students ranging in age from preschool to university. Three were US residents and native speakers of English, while the other five hailed from Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. Table 1 outlines the teachers' home languages (L1), teaching experience, and IU placements.

Table 1
Teacher Background and Teaching Assignments

<i>Teacher name*</i>	<i>L1</i>	<i>Previous teaching</i>	<i>IU department</i>	<i>Course</i>
Alex	English	None	Management Science	Presentation Skills
Aran	Korean	2 years in Korean private academies	Agriculture	Writing, Speaking, and Listening
Changho	Korean	5 years in Korean private academies	Chemistry	Writing and Presentation Skills
Eric	English	Tutoring children and practicum in Taiwan	Chemistry	Speaking at the Workplace
Hyunjung	Korean	17 years in Korean middle schools	Nursing	Reading and Conversation Skills
Jill	English	2-month university practicum in Thailand	Medicine and Public Health	Oral Communication
Orn	Thai	2 years university teaching in Thailand	Chemistry	Speaking at the Workplace
Yukari	Japanese	None	Management Science	English for Business

Note: Teachers' real names are used at their request.

The teachers taught classes varying from Presentation Skills to Academic Writing in five university departments. One major chal-

lenge for us was that IU, like all Thai universities, was transitioning to a new academic calendar with an August start (previously it had begun in June). The Thai students, therefore, were taking our classes voluntarily during their summer holidays (although some departments enforced attendance).

My Role as Supervisor

Leading a practicum, especially in an international context, requires instructors to play multiple roles: As supervisor, I monitored their lesson-planning processes and observed their classes. As professor, I taught them about reflective teaching practices and action research methodology. As mentor, I listened to their concerns about their students' participation and supported them in finding resolutions to interpersonal issues with colleagues. Because I volunteered to teach English for Specific Purposes classes to university staff, I also provided a teaching model when the teachers helped the Public Health lecturers in my class write conference abstracts, for example.

The practicum was a new course for me as a faculty member. My colleague who had led groups to IU since 2007 had established the program and introduced me to his contacts at the university, but beyond having a copy of his syllabus, I was on my own to develop the daily plans and assignment specifications. I wanted the practicum to give the teachers the benefits I had gained as a MA student in a practicum, such as bonding with my students and experiencing the challenges of salvaging a failed lesson plan. On the other hand, I also wanted as supervisor to take on a more mentoring role than I had experienced from my own supervisor, who provided me with feedback only after her two classroom observations. I therefore set up the practicum course to be integrally twined with my observations of the teachers' classes. I also wanted the action research course to feel equally integral to the practicum. My goal was for the teachers to see the courses as two sides of a coin: one where they investigated their students' learning for the purpose of improving their teaching, and the other for building their own and others' knowledge of language teaching and learning. While each graduate course met at a different time, had a separate syllabus, and had distinct assignments, I encouraged the teachers to keep a single teaching and research journal to write reflections about their daily teaching that could also serve as a form of data collection and a place to record preliminary analyses.

Challenges and Benefits

As a first-time supervisor leading a group of teachers to a country I had previously visited only as a tourist, I faced many challenges but

also discovered many personal and professional benefits. Culturally, I was completely unfamiliar with the norms for polite interaction or even how to navigate a university campus on the outskirts of a Thai city. I was able, therefore, to serve the teachers not as an expert but rather as a fellow novice when it came to negotiating course schedules or finding a meal on a national holiday. Like most of them, I was dependent on our English-speaking hosts (the Thai staff of the IU International Relations office, plus an Australian English teacher who had worked at IU for many years, and professors and support staff in the various departments) to set up meetings and provide transportation for activities. Jill, who had participated in the previous year's IU practicum, took the lead our first days on campus, showing us where key buildings were situated and explaining how to order pad thai from the street vendors. Orn, a native Thai speaker new to the Issan region, translated for taxi drivers and craftspeople. Through time, the teachers befriended their students and learned about favorite restaurants and the best bar snacks. The Chemistry Department organized excursions for the teachers working with the department but also invited me and the other teachers to join in.

Immersion in Thai culture also meant that the teachers had to learn how to adapt their assumptions about teaching and lesson planning to a different set of student expectations. Hyunjung, for example, had long taught middle-school boys in Korean public schools and felt confident about her teaching abilities. When she was assigned to a class of beginning-level nursing students at IU, however, she quickly found that she needed to rethink her goals and activities. As she wrote in her MA thesis, she experienced the Thai expectation of *sanuk*—that everything should include an element of fun. In contrast with the Korean boys, who had needed discipline in order to learn, the young Thai women expected her to provide games that would make them laugh. Yukari similarly noted the importance of *sanuk* in teaching, writing in her thesis about the action research cycles that took her from a business-writing curriculum based on expectations of similarities with Japanese students to a grammar-based basic language class to finally a debate forum that engaged her first-year business students in competition and communication. Learning to adapt pushed the teachers beyond their cultural comfort zones and, as Hyunjung noted, helped them see how culture played a key part in curriculum and instruction. Pedagogically, I discovered that making my classes experiential took much more work than planning a typical readings- and lecture-based graduate seminar. A practicum course should support teachers to make intellectual connections between their work in the classroom—whether they have never taught or have taught for decades—and what

they have learned about teaching and learning. Reflective practice, therefore, is central (Farrell, 2015). I built multiple forms of reflection into the practicum course syllabus, including written reflection through a teaching journal submitted biweekly, reflections on syllabi and lesson plans, a summative reflective paper, oral reflections through in-class discussion of rehearsals of planned activities, disastrous lessons, and other issues, and one-to-one reflection with me while viewing the video of class sessions I had observed.

Reflection coupled with experiential learning pushed the teachers to see their work from alternative perspectives. One of the more successful practices I incorporated into the practicum class was an adaptation of the “rehearsals” that my colleague had used in past years. Whereas he had asked the teachers to bring in their lesson plans and discuss (from a metalevel) what they planned to do, I made the rehearsals into practice sessions. Each week, three teachers prepared the materials they needed to teach an activity to their Thai students. As one teacher implemented his activity, six of the other teachers and I played the role of students, and the seventh teacher observed. We put ourselves in the shoes of the university students whose limited English proficiency might cause them to misunderstand the teacher’s instructions or the vocabulary needed in the activity. After about 15 minutes, the observer summarized what she had seen, noting where students seemed confused as well as where the instructional practices succeeded. The teacher reflected orally from his perspective, and the students contributed our feelings as learners. In his postcourse reflection, Eric credited the rehearsals for helping him learn to see his teaching through others’ eyes:

I created the activity myself and I knew from the beginning that there were many holes in the preliminary design of the activity. So I wanted to first try the activity during the rehearsal. Going through a test run would help me understand what problems there were in the activity. For both rehearsals, I received a good amount of advice; although I did not agree with all of the advice, they were able to point me in the right direction. . . . The rehearsals were a big help, as I was able to learn more about constructing courses, lessons, and activities while improving my behavior as well.

Eric’s commentary reflected what the other teachers also noted in end-of-course evaluations: that the practicum seminar contributed to their ability to think about their teaching from an observer’s stance. These additional perspectives pushed the teachers to improve their

practice through connecting new knowledge of their Thai students with academic knowledge of language teaching and learning.

An element that makes an international practicum unique is the personal involvement of both teachers and supervisor with one another as they build a learning community in isolation from their regular lives. A challenge for me was being socially limited to the small circle of practicum participants. While many of the teachers began socializing with their students, who invited them to go out and participate in activities, I did not make such contacts. I had hoped to make friends with university staff or professors, but they were busy with their jobs and did not reach out to me. I enjoyed spending time with the teachers, but I felt that our official professor-student relationship often took priority and that I needed to give them space to vent away from my hearing.

Nevertheless, I gained as much from leading the practicum as I believe the teachers did from participating in it. Having taught English as a Peace Corps volunteer in Uzbekistan, going into the summer I thought I knew what I was getting into. Like the teachers I was now mentoring, I had wrestled as a novice instructor in a new culture, deciphering university bureaucracy and unfamiliar cultural practices. I wanted to impart all this experience to the teachers, but upon arriving in Thailand, I had to remind myself that I did not have to resolve all the problems they encountered but instead needed to let them learn from experience how to search out solutions and find the processes for getting things done on their own. I was able to relate with their struggles to make sense of their surroundings, contributing advice as needed, but I learned to hold back when I saw that they had the capacity to find their own solutions. Sharing our common stories served as a central feature in our communal meals and provided us with a way to bond within our community.

Conclusion

Leading an international teaching practicum with a diverse group of graduate student teachers can challenge even experienced teacher educators. As I have noted above, cultural, academic, and personal issues can affect the smooth running of a program. For supervisors wishing to give teachers real-world experience, however, it is entirely worth the effort. Lessons learned from supervising an international practicum include the importance of thinking about all the aspects noted above: Besides pedagogical issues common to all practicum courses, the international setting means that teachers will have to develop an understanding of a new culture and how they fit personally

into that culture. Being far from home requires everyone—teachers and supervisors—to form a new community supporting each other and to lower the professor-student boundaries they may have had before.

My recommendations for faculty wishing to set up similar international teaching practicum programs stem from my own experiences. An essential element is the predeparture preparation on both ends. Teachers need to have as much information as possible about the setting, their students, and the courses they will teach and take. The host institution needs to fully understand what the practicum teachers will (and will not) be able to do as well as the parameters in which they will teach. Because I wanted the teachers to observe each other, I had to insist that their classes be scheduled at different times during the day. On arrival we still faced difficulties with two departments that had agreed to the initial plans but then had not recruited students for the teachers' classes. While some communication difficulties are to be expected in an international setting, having a strong in-country contact can alleviate much of the uncertainty the supervisor may face. In designing practicum course work, integrating reflection with mentored teaching practice can provide core support to novice teachers and to experienced teachers entering new contexts. As Childs (2011) observed, teachers learn best when they are pushed to articulate and reflect on their practices. The wide variety of oral and written reflection, done independently and in collaboration with peers, enabled the teachers to gain perspectives on their teaching that directly led to adaptations and improvements in their work.

Finally, the social and personal aspects of teaching are also important, for both teachers and supervisor. An international practicum means being away from home and familiar comforts, so teachers need to find community with each other. The teachers who joined me in Thailand became fast friends during our two months together and continued to support each other during the subsequent semesters. A teaching practicum can profoundly influence participants' personal and professional lives, so it behooves supervisors to be careful and deliberate in designing the entire program. With a positive experience, teachers may realize what Alex wrote in his final reflection: "The practicum and the overall experience in Thailand as an English teacher have helped me to define what kind of teacher I am, what I believe in, and even more acted as a truly life changing experience that opened the door to my love for teaching."

Author

Betsy Gilliland is an assistant professor in the Department of Second Language Studies at the University of Hawai‘i Mānoa. Her research investigates language-teacher learning, action research, and adolescent second language writing. She has published recently in *Language and Education*, *Reading in a Foreign Language*, and *Canadian Modern Language Review*.

Note

¹I call the UH graduate students *teachers* to distinguish them from the Thai *students* they taught.

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