Adult Education Research Conference

2006 Conference Proceedings (Minneapolis, MN)

Navigating the Cultural Maze in Program Planning for A Transnational Collaborative Initiative

Mazalan B. Kamis

Rosemary S. Caffarella
cornell University

Mazanah Muhamad

Othman Omat
University of Putra Malaysia

See next page for additional authors

Recommended Citation

Author Information

Mazalan B. Kamis, Rosemary S. Caffarella, Mazanah Muhamad, and Othman Omat

Navigating the Cultural Maze in Program Planning for
A Transnational Collaborative Initiative

Mazalan B. Kamis, Rosemary S. Caffarella
Cornell University

Mazanah Muhamad, Othman Omar,
University of Putra Malaysia

Key words: Program planning, culture, transnational

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore, through autobiographical narratives of each of the authors, the story of how this planning team navigated the cultural complexities in planning a transnational collaborative program involving two sites, one in the United States and another in Malaysia. More specifically, examples of specific ways of thinking and actions are provided that illustrate planning practices as related to five significant aspects of Malaysian culture

Introduction and Literature Review

The purpose of this paper is to explore, through autobiographical narratives of each of the authors, the story of how this planning team navigated the cultural complexities in planning a transnational collaborative program involving two sites, one in the United States (US) and another in Malaysia. We first present a brief overview of pertinent literature on program planning, which frames the major argument of our paper. We then describe the project, the culture of the Malay, and examples that illustrate selected significant aspects of the Malay culture that were taken into account either knowing or unknowingly by us, the four authors of this paper, in our roles as program planners.

The majority of the literature on program planning has consisted of models and tasks that are prescriptive in nature, with little empirical data that support them. In other words, scholars and practitioners have provided us with maps or guides to planning programs for adults that in practice often are not as useful as the writers of those materials had hoped as they do not correspond well to the "real-live" practice of program planners. This work, for the most part, has represented program planning as technical in nature, with the assertion that if planners learn the skills of program planning, such as conducting needs assessments, providing good instruction, and ensuring all of the administrative aspects of programs are well taken care of, that the programs will be successful (Knowles, 1980; Milano & Ullius, 1998, Sork & Caffarella, 1989). Rather, what has been ascertained by other researchers is there are a number of other factors of program planning that are just as important, and some even claim more important, than just technical knowledge and skills. The most significant of these factors are power, ethics, and the context of the planning situation (Caffarella, 2002; Cervero & Wilson, 1994; 2006; Houle, 1972; Sork, 2000). Although the word context is an over used and often undefined term throughout the field of education, in the program planning literature context is most often defined as the "human, organizational, and environmental factors that affect program planning" (Caffarella, 2002, p. 65). Using this framework, one of the major environmental aspects of program planning is the varying cultures within which planners work. Taking culture into account often requires

that planners think and act in new and unfamiliar ways. However, what is meant by being culturally sensitive in planning programs for adults still remains elusive, as few researchers have tried to tease out why this way of working is so significant for those who are actually doing the planning. More specifically, little empirical evidence on how culture influences planning transnational programs for adults, especially across borders where the cultural differences are highly visible, is still very limited (Waly, Sheckley & Kehrhahn, 2000; Endresen & von Kotze, 2005).

The Project

The Malaysian Breast Cancer Education Project (MBCEP), a collaborative project between Cornell University and University Putra Malaysia (UPM), was initiated in 2003. The project maintains two offices; one in the Institute of Peace and Community Development (PEKKA) of UPM and another in the Department of Education at Cornell. A Program Coordinator and a Program Manager who are both Malaysians manage the Malaysian office. The office at Cornell is headed by a Program Coordinator, an American, and assisted by a Program Manager, a Malaysian. The rigorous efforts from both offices have enabled the project to effectively build strong stakeholder support that includes organizations and prominent individuals from both countries, and allowed the successful implementation of a wide array of activities. Since the majority of the activities are being carried out in Malaysia, where the prominent culture is that of the Malays, the team made the assumption going into the project that it would be critical to have all parties involved recognize the importance that culture plays in planning and addressing the initial goals and the ever growing needs that emerge as the project has evolved.

The Culture of the Malay

The Malay is the major ethnic community that is spread throughout Southeast Asia (SEA) and more that 200 million people in the region speak the Malay Language, Bahasa Melayu. In Malaysia, the Malay is the largest ethnic group making up nearly 60% of the estimated population of 25 million people. The culture of the Malays in Malaysia is synonymous largely with Islam, mixing with small elements of Hinduism. To appreciate the culture, one must understand the role of Islam as adhered to by the community and the history of Hinduism in SEA. Additionally, one needs to have a good grasp of *Bahasa Melayu* (also known as *Bahasa Malaysia* or *Bahasa Indonesia*), which contains numerous *peribahasa* (proverbs) reflecting the lifestyles and worldviews of the Malay. From the field of communication, the Malay culture belongs to what is described as a "high context" culture where the environment, settings, individuals, and relationships are all intertwined to give meaning to messages that are given (Varner & Beamer, 1995). From the philosophical angle, Malays share many attributes of the Eastern ways such as priority to collective accomplishment, emotion-centered thinking, and not so aggressive in approach (Lim, 2003).

The Navigation

Through this autobiographical narrative we explore in our role as program planners selected experiences that we encountered in navigating significant aspects of the Malay culture. More specifically our ways of thinking and actions are illustrated through examples that are interwoven into our planning and conducting of the varied activities of the MBCEP.
With Age, Comes Wisdom

To the Malays, respect for older people is a priority and must always be observed. The feudalistic elements of the old Malay still run deep within the community, and with that their continued acceptance of the notion "with age, comes wisdom". Among other things this belief implies that decision making is limited to the realm of the elders, or at least receives their blessing. Hence, Mazalan, being the "junior planner", resorts to "requesting to be instructed" by the Rosemary, the Head of the program in the US, to show to the elders in Malaysia that he is not acting on his own, but rather with the blessing of the elders in the US. Although, Rosemary was aware of this cultural factor from her readings (Merriam & Mohamad, 2000) and her own experiences in Malaysia, she did not view this way of thinking as part of the "operational norms" for the project until the project was well underway. Rather, she assumed that the project was a partnership among equals, and besides she never would have considered herself nor her Malaysian colleagues as "elders". However, when Rosemary reflects back on the project she now sees many times where her "elder status" was quite evident. For example, when Mazalan first came to the US, he and Rosemary met a number of times to discuss possible contacts across the university whom Mazalan should get to know. It took her a couple of weeks to understand why he was not making appointments with these people. In essence, in Malaysia it would have been expected that the "elder" of the project, that being Rosemary in the US, would have accompanied Mazalan and introduced him to each of these people. In the US, especially within the context of the university in which we work, striking out to meet people on your own by just saying that "Rosemary thought it would be helpful to meet you" is a very accepted practice.

Collective Accomplishment

Malays are taught to suppress one's selfish desire to lead a virtuous life (Noor, 1999) and focus on *'manafaat'* (benefit) that they can bring to their communities. Noor gives an example that when a Malay goes to work, it is meant to fulfill the family's economic gain rather than a personal career gain. As for the MBCEP, none of us ever thought in terms of any type of personal or even economic gain we might receive from being a part of this project. Rather, we viewed the project as a collective effort, with our major motivation being giving back to the community blessings each had each received in facing breast cancer, either as a survivor or family member. We discovered that most breast cancer survivors refused to share their personal stories for fear of being glorified as an individual, but when approached as a group, they willingly participated without hesitation. The project's outreach activities are continually redesigned to include this element of collectivity.

Another example of this collective accomplishment is when Rosemary had the privilege of being one of the major speakers for the launching of five publications that had been translated into *Bahasa Melayu*. There were a fairly large number of breast cancer patients and survivors, although not individually recognized in any way (for example, having a different type of name tag or the wearing of pink ribbons), who were invited as honored quests. As part of her speech, Rosemary decided to use her "western ways", but in a collective manner, by asking all of these honored guests to stand and be recognized for their courage and willingness to work with other cancer patients and survivors. It is a moment Rosemary will never forget when 35 to 40 members of the audience proudly stood together, acknowledging their collective fight against breast cancer. These women for the most part were "just ordinary women" of Malaysia, who hand-in-hand were willing to show their support and commitment to educating women and their families about breast cancer to a selected group of key "Malaysian elders", which was linked to their positions in the government, universities, and the private sector that comprised the majority of the audience.

Menjaga air muka (Literally meaning, save water face or protect one's dignity)

In order to maintain a harmonious community, the Malays uphold that one is responsible in *"menjaga air muka"* for other members of their community (Lim, 2003). It is crucial that the *"air muka,"* especially that of the elders and the community, must never be put in a position where they could feel shame. Mazalan, in the course of conducting his study of the transformative learning experiences among Malay professionals during the political crisis in the late nineties found that *"menjaga air muka"* played a significance role in transformation learning (Kamis, 2002). Therefore, as going through a transformative learning experience often becomes one of the ways that breast cancer patients and survivors use to cope with their diagnosis, treatment, and their "life after cancer" understanding the important of "*menjaga air muka*" in these learning experiences is critical. We needed to enable these women to protect their dignity, no matter their medical conditions or personal life situations, as part of what were often painful transformational learning experiences. Another example was seen in the course of preparing for official functions of the project in Malaysia that would be graced by a prominent politician and other dignitaries, which is a part of the Malaysian way of "launching" major aspects of projects such as ours,. We all witnessed how chaotic the planning process was for events of this nature, and yet incredibly all went smoothly with these official functions, as everyone had work exhaustively in their effort to *"menjaga air muka"* of the project and the host organization.

In many of the phone conversations between Mazalan in the US and Mazanah (the head of project in Malaysia and also treated as "elder" by Mazalan), Mazalan is often reminded of the need to *"menjaga air muka"* by striving hard to make the project a success, less it bring a bad reputation to the country and the people of Malaysia. For example, when a visit to Cornell University by an official representative of the Malaysian Government was cancelled at the last minute, Mazalan, who was heavily involved with the planning of the event, was extremely upset for he was worried what his colleagues at Cornell would think about his people. He felt that he not only failed to protect the dignity, but also played a part in dropping down the *"air muka"'* of the people of Malaysia. He was quite relieved when he learned that his colleagues at Cornell, including the President of the university and two Deans, were not at all offended, but rather understood very well why this distinguished person was called away to be at an critical international forum to represent the Malaysian government. Thus, there was no loss of the *"air muka"* for the people of Malaysia.

The Intertwining of 'adat' and Religion

The separation of 'church' from the state does not exist in many non-Western countries including Malaysia. The lifestyle of the Malays is so intertwined with religion, that many of its 'adat' (customary practices) provide the bases upon which Malay beliefs and ideologies are founded becomes institutionalized (Kling, 1995). Often a function, or an event begins with the recitation from the Holy Qur'an, meetings often observe a moment of silence to give way to the call to prayer, and the start and end of an activity is often determine by the timing of the Muslim five daily prayers. In fact, a Malay's daily activities and his/her sense of timing is closely tied to the daily prayer timetable.

In Malaysia, going for a lunch break that takes place between mid-noon until 2:00 pm is almost a compulsory endeavor, for this also coincides with the time for the *Zuhr* prayer for Muslims. Often when a meeting covers the entire lunch break, it will have to either stop before the next prayer is scheduled or provide provision for Muslim attendees to 'observe' the prayer. On Friday, the day when Muslim males are required to attend congregational prayer at mid-noon, meetings scheduled during this period must be avoided entirely. Without such provision, a

practicing Muslim would find it distracting as he could no longer be fully attentive in the meeting as he feels the need to fulfill his (religious) obligation. It is unusual to set appointment times for meetings during this time period, a normal practice in the United States which Mazalan found rather strange initially. Whether a Muslim actually "observes" the prayer is immaterial, the fact is everyone understood the need to have a break not just to supplement one's physical need but also one's spiritual need. The word 'observe' here means more than just staying still for a moment of silent. Rather, this break in the daily routine entails a wholesome ritual act, which requires a person to be entirely removed from his or her current chores. Before a prayer is performed, one is required to do *Wudhu*, that is, to clean with running water certain parts of the body which include: entire face, small portion of the front of the head, and both arms, ears, and legs. Since *Wudhu* requires clean running water, a trip to a restroom is almost a must. A restroom in a modern office often incorporates a special corner for *wudhu*. Once *wudhu* is done, one will head to a *Surau* (a payer room) or back to one's office to perform the prayer. To perform the prayer in one's office, first s/he lays a prayer mat to the direction of Mecca, and then stands on the mat, followed by a bow, a prostrate, and a sit. The movement is repeated in orderly fashion four times for the Zuhr prayer and two, three or four times for other prayers. Each of the bodily movements is accompanied by reading of verses from the Holy Qur'an. The entire sequence from *wudhu* through to the end of a prayer takes less than ten minutes to perform. Women may require a longer time as they often need to put their make up back on soon after the prayer. Understanding that the Malays' daily activities are interwoven with spiritual and religious obligations is important as they do have an impact on how a project or organizational activities will be carried out.

Relationship Based

Like many other non-Western cultures, in many of their activities the Malays are more focused on building warmth and meaningful relationships, and as such, at least from some Westerners' perspectives often seems less efficient. Mazalan, who had been working for nearly fifteen years in Malaysia before moving to the US, took a little while to adjust to the working style at Cornell, which was more focused on getting an activity done and quickly moving on to the next one. A meeting has to end precisely at the stipulated time, with little consideration whether a meaningful relationship has been established. Food is always taken "to go" to increase the efficient usage of time, whereas as a Malay, Mazalan is taught by his parents and now teaching his own children to respect food and never eat when standing, let alone walking.

During his recent trip to Malaysia, for example, Mazalan had a chance to talk and witness how Aida (not her real name), a volunteer program planner for the project's support group, planned for a weekend activity for her group. He noticed that she spent one entire day making numerous calls to the many members of the group. According to Aida, sending emails are not enough unless they are followed by telephone calls. A phone conversation is much richer than email and often takes personal dimensions as callers delve deeper into other issues before discussing the purpose of the call. Aida's relationship with group members is further strengthened by each call and since members also telephone each other, consequently the group becomes stronger. Mazalan had a chance to attend the group's weekend activity and observed so much warmth being displayed by members towards each other, an indication that meaningful relationships had been sealed.

Conclusion

The narratives present empirical evidence of the intricacies of cultural practices that influence program planning in a non-Western community. The straight forward objectives and outcomes driven approach to program planning, so evident in the Western tradition of program planning had to undergo many twists and turns as the navigators, in this case Rosemary, Mazanah, Othman, and Mazalan, moved through the varied mazes of cultural domains of the East and the West. Therefore, we content that technical knowledge and political/power relations, although key elements in the program planning process, need to be supplemented with cultural interpretations in order to gain an adequate understanding of how transnational programs, like the MBCEP, are constructed and carried out.

References

Caffarella, R. S. (2002). *Planning programs for adult learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cervero, R.M., & Wilson, A. L. (1994). *Planning responsibility for adult education: A Guide to negotiating power and interests*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cervero, R.M. & Wilson, A.L. (2006). *Working the planning table: Negotiating democratically for adult, continuing, and workplace learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Endresen, K., & von Kotze, A. (2005). Living while being alive: Education and learning in the Treatment Action Campaign. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 24*(5), 431-441.

Houle, C. (1972). *The design of education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kamis, M. (2002). *Transformative learning among educated young Malay professionals*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Universiti Putra, Malaysia.

Kling, Z. (1995). The Malay family: Beliefs and realities. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 26*(1), 43-53.

Knowles, M. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Lim, K. (2003). *Budi as the Malay mind: A philosophical study of Malay ways of reasoning and emotion in peribahasa*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Hamburg, Germany.

Merriam, S.B., & Mohamad, M. (2000). How cultural values shape learning in older adulthood. *Adult Education Quarterly, 51*(1), 32-44.

Milano, M., & Ullius, D. (1998). *Designing powerful training: The sequential-iterative model*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Noor, N.M. (1999). Roles and women's well-being: Some preliminary findings from Malaysia. *Sex Roles, 41*, 123-145.

Sork, T. J. (2000). Planning educational programs. In A.L. Wilson & E.R. Hayes (Eds.) *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp.171-190). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sork, T. J., & Caffarella, R. S. (1989). Planning programs for adults. In S. B. Merriam & P. M.Cunningham (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 233-245). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Varner, I., & Beamer, L. (1995) *Intercultural communication in the global workplace*. Boston: Irwin McGraw-Hill.

Waly, D., Sheckley, B.G., & Kehrhahn, M. (2000). Adult learning in a non-western context: The influence of culture in a Senegalese farming village. *Adult Education Quarterly, 51*(1), 32-44.

Wilson, A. L. (2005). Program planning. In L. M. English (Ed.) *International encyclopedia of adult education* (pp. 524-529). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.