

Case

Adjusting to a New Environment

Several weeks into the semester, one morning during break, An Trang speaks to her writing instructor, Ms. Ito. She explains that Bao Nguyen, her Vietnamese classmate, is unable to come to class today and has asked her to hand in his writing homework. Ms. Ito asks if Bao is ill and An hesitates but then says, "Yes, he is very homesick, but his parents insist that he stay, learn English, and then go to graduate school in the U.S." She continues by describing his situation in more detail. He rents a room off campus but spends most of his time alone. Because of this situation, he is unable to attend class or concentrate on his studies. He can't sleep at night and has trouble eating American food. An explains that she is very worried about him because, even though he has gone to the doctor and is taking medication to help him sleep, he is unable to sleep more than a few hours every night. Ms. Ito remembers that he has missed many classes, and when he is there he seems distracted and has difficulty focusing. In fact, he often seems to have trouble keeping his eyes open. Ms. Ito thanks An for submitting Bao's paper and for explaining Bao's situation. She asks her to please tell Bao that the teachers are concerned about him and would like to help him.

Questions for Discussion

1. What additional information would help you better understand this case?
2. How do you think An feels about Bao and his situation before she talk to Ms. Ito?
3. How do you think Ms. Ito feels about Bao and his situation?
4. How can Ms. Ito or anyone discover what the "real" issues affecting Bao are? For example, is Bao simply suffering from culture shock?
5. What options does Ms. Ito have in dealing with Bao's situation? Evaluate each option.

Extending the Case

Consider the four situations presented. Then reflect on these questions: (1) How does each situation differ from or relate to this case? (2) What contributing factors come into play in each situation? and (3) What are the possible courses of action for each?

1. Each week in her U.S. Culture class, an instructor allows 10 minutes for general student questions regarding U.S. culture. One week two unrelated questions arise. First, several students ask why some U.S. college women wear short shorts, short skirts, and blouses that don't cover their midriffs to class whereas others seem to wear pajamas and slippers to class. They ask why professors allow students to attend class dressed this way. Other students make the comment that Asian toilets are more sanitary than Western toilets and that this seems particularly true of public restrooms. The students go on to describe in detail the cleanliness or lack of cleanliness in the bathrooms in the residence halls.
2. Before class one day, a student from the People's Republic of China is talking to her classmates about tipping in the United States. They all agree that it is very confusing to know when and how much to tip because in many countries people do not leave tips. She asks about tipping taxi drivers. When the instructor enters the class, they ask her about tipping taxi drivers. The instructor explains that it is customary in the U.S. to tip taxi drivers about 15 to 20 percent. The student is puzzled and explains that she took a taxi and it cost \$12.00. She gave the driver a \$20 bill, and he didn't give her change.
3. One evening during break, an instructor hears several Somali women talking about their children's school and teachers. They value education and feel it is the way for their children to succeed in the United States. However, they are unable to help their children with their studies and do not understand the U.S. educational system. For example, they ask each other, "What is this parent-teacher conference?"
4. Before the beginning of class on Monday, the instructor joins a conversation with a group of students who are talking about their weekend activities. One student from Argentina explains that she went out with friends to several bars on Friday night, shopped and took

a sightseeing tour on Saturday, and attended the Gay Pride parade and festivities on Sunday. She continues to list activities that she has planned for the following days and weeks. She exclaims that she loves her roommate, loves everything about the United States, and loves all the friendly people, especially the handsome men.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. List four or five aspects of a new environment that may be different from one's usual environment (e.g., food, transportation system).
2. Which of these aspects may be difficult to adjust to? Why? Which ones may be easy to adjust to? Why?
3. Drawing on your initial list, which aspects seem most appropriate to discuss in class? Why?
4. How can faculty recognize when students are not adjusting well? How can faculty assess the seriousness of the difficulties?
5. List four or five ways that faculty can assist students who are having adjustment problems.
6. What are three or four ways that faculty can assist students in achieving a balance between their social lives (e.g., making new friends, exploring the sights of the areas, having new experiences) and their academic studies?
7. List two or three activities that allow faculty to introduce and discuss differences among cultures in terms of daily activities (e.g., tipping, transportation system, bureaucratic procedures) without making value judgments.

Delving Deeper

1. *Culture shock* is a term often applied to initial adjustment to a new environment. To what extent does it seem an appropriate term? How is culture shock generally defined, and what are the usual stages of adjustment? Have you ever experienced culture shock? Using the Internet and other resources, find definitions and examples. Write about your findings and your experiences. If you like, include a figure showing the stages of culture shock, either one you create or one you find. Document your sources appropriately. Be prepared to share your findings as well.
2. Think of times that you have been in other countries, cities, or even cultural areas where you were unsure of the customs or how things were done. Think of friends or relatives that you know who have traveled abroad or experienced adjusting to a new environment or culture. How did you and others adjust? What factors seem important to successful adjustments? Make a list of factors, and explain each. Use the Internet and other resources to check and revise your list. Share your list with others either in writing or in discussion. Document your sources.

Resources

- DeCapua, A., & Wintergerst, A. C. (2004). Culture shock. In *Crossing cultures in the language classroom* (pp. 105–144). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hess, J. D. (1997). *Studying abroad/learning abroad: An abridged version of the whole world guide to culture learning*. Boston: Intercultural Press.
- Ogami, N. (Producer). (1987). *Cold Water* [DVD]. Boston: Intercultural Press.
- Stori, C. (2001). *The art of crossing cultures* (2nd ed.). Boston: Nicholas Brealey.
- Thomas, K., & Harrell, T. (1994). Counseling student sojourners: Revisiting the U-curve of adjustment. In G. Althen (Ed.), *Learning across cultures* (pp. 89–107). Alexandria, VA: NAFSA.
- Torbiörn, I. (1994). Dynamics of cross-cultural adaptation. In G. Althen (Ed.), *Learning across cultures* (pp. 31–55). Alexandria, VA: NAFSA.
- Worldwide Classroom: Consortium for International Education & Multicultural Studies. www.worldwideedu/travel_planner/culture_shock.html.

Resolution to the Featured Case

After class, Ms. Ito sent Bao an email, expressing her concern for his well-being and encouraging him to speak to her privately. She also spoke to Mr. Youngblood, the director of the IEP, about Bao's situation. Mr. Youngblood asked that Ms. Ito ask Bao to come and speak to him when he returned to class. Mr. Youngblood also checked with each of Bao's instructors about his performance. Bao generally missed the morning classes, telling his instructors that he couldn't sleep at night and then couldn't get up for class. He generally was attending the afternoon classes. All the teachers said he seemed tired and distracted. When Bao met with Mr. Youngblood later that week, he was obviously distraught and tired from lack of sleep. Based on their conversation and information from faculty, Mr. Youngblood made an appointment for Bao with a counselor on campus. After several counseling sessions, Bao and the counselor convinced his parents that he needed to return to Vietnam for health reasons. With the help of Ms. Ito, Mr. Youngblood, and the counselor, Bao officially withdrew, left the program, and returned home within a month of An's speaking to Ms. Ito about Bao's situation.

MY THOUGHTS on the
Resolution