

In-country Asia Literacy Teacher Learning Programs

Australia's new national curriculum has been open for public consultation throughout much of 2010, and it is highly anticipated that studies of Asia will be embedded within its final design. The Asia literacy component will impact on subject matter across all curriculum areas and all schooling levels. Supporting the implementation of Asia literacy the National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools identified teacher professional learning as one of the six interlinked essential elements.

The National Statement elaborated on these elements, outlining requirements for teacher professional learning, indicating that a diverse range of approaches should be offered. One of these approaches included in-country study programs, which for some years now, have been delivered to support cultural learning amongst teachers. These have often been planned and delivered on an ad hoc basis by teachers, and increasingly they are being offered by teacher associations. The aim of this paper is to discuss the structural, content, and value for money factors, that principals and teachers should consider when making their decision to select, attend and invest in an in-country study program.

Basic Structure

In-country teacher professional learning programs should be interactive, offering opportunities for experiential learning, group activities and discussions, person to person networking, and self directed exploration. These approaches will promote an environment where participants can tailor the program to their specific needs, explore different perspectives of new knowledge, generate new ideas for teaching practice, and collaborate with peers throughout the learning process.

The nature of these programs ensures that participants are immersed in new information and experiences. Programs should be structured to optimise learning by framing content in a way that promotes participant analysis and interpretation of new information through the analytical lens of the teacher. A well designed program should guide the participant to promote processing of new information and experiences to produce new knowledge applicable to the teacher and teaching practice.

To facilitate this dynamic, interactive structure and framing of content, the leadership of an experienced program leader with excellent inter-cultural understanding is imperative. With these basic structural features, the content of an in-country program can be transformed to deliver new knowledge about Asia that participants can later apply to the school and classroom environment.

Cultural Sites

Visits to historic, geographic and cultural sites are an important part of any in-country program as they are not just a source of new knowledge. Participants also experience the locality, proximity and surrounds of the site and this experience reinforces the knowledge gained. A diverse range of sites that provide a broad representation of the culture should be included to provide a sound foundation for curriculum focused knowledge. In the case of teachers of visual arts for example, visits to sites such as Huang Shan World Heritage National Park enable the teacher to appreciate the inspirational source of Chinese traditional art where artists have sketched and painted interpretations of these natural features for many centuries.

A well designed in-country program will select sites that provide a source of new knowledge and learning for teachers with a diverse range of curriculum interests. The city of Ping Yao is a classic example. This city is a living museum. It is a fully intact Qing Dynasty city with totally original architecture. It is unique because it's not another empty monument for tourists. The local people

still live here. History teachers would find this a fascinating site. But so too would teachers of business, as Ping Yao is also China's first financial centre and has museums that explain the origins of accounting methods, finance and banking in China.

The point to be taken from this simple example is that when selecting an in-country program questions about the details of sites and locations need to be asked in relation to the relevant curriculum areas. When selecting these programs principals and teachers should ask questions such as:

- Specifically, where are we going within each locality?
- What will we see, learn about, and experience?
- How will I receive this knowledge? Participants should be looking for group visits, self-directed exploration, small group discussions with peers and local counterparts, and personal interactions with local people.
- What will I see, learn about, and experience that is specific to my curriculum area? Ask about specific activities and whether there is flexibility in the program to take on some self-directed activities. An experienced program leader should have sufficient local knowledge to provide the necessary advice.

Group Discussions

The programs basic structure should provide opportunities for group discussion. This does not necessarily require a daily classroom session, as in most cases this is logistically impossible. One of the most effective forums for discussion is over a meal. Ensuring the program includes group lunches and dinners is important, not just for sustenance, but it brings the group together, enables discussions, and it enables interaction with, and questioning of peers and the program leader. Group discussions should promote critical reflection on new knowledge and experiences as well as an exchange of new ideas on curriculum, resources, and approaches to teaching and learning in a professional context with peers. Prior to committing to the program, it is important to identify where time has been allocated for group discussion and peer interaction.

Personal Interaction with Asian Counterparts

Meeting with, getting to know, and exchanging ideas with Asian counterparts is an important opportunity that participants should seek out during these programs. This enables participants to exchange ideas on curriculum, resources and approaches to teaching and learning within the context of Asia literacy. Participants should aim to leave with contact details so that they can follow-up and build on exchanges after returning to Australia. To ensure participants receive this opportunity it is essential that the program includes a visit to an appropriate school, university or educational institution.

Build an Information Flow

Visits to schools or educational or other institutions should foster skills and networks to enable participants to acquire information about Asian peoples, events, issues and lifestyles. Following on from the previous section, this is about looking for ways to continue interactions with Asia, so that participants build and maintain a flow of information that will support their knowledge and teaching practices.

An art teacher for example may wish to collect brochures, contact details, website details from specific art schools or galleries they visit. This will enable access to a flow of information, knowledge, and ideas to support teaching innovation in the classroom. Many of the places visited in Asia will have English content websites and newsletters. Once participants have visited these places, subscribing to newsletters and following websites is a great way of maintaining contact and currency with Asia literacy knowledge.

Sister School Opportunities

A school visit should not simply involve a welcome speech from the principal and 15 minutes of watching students in a classroom. Visits to schools or educational institutions should provide access to Asian counterparts so that participants can achieve some of the above interactions. Participants should also be thinking about using these contacts to develop a sister school relationship. They may not be planning this immediately, but this is an opportunity to gain value adding contacts that can be used in the future. It will make it much easier to develop a sister school link in the future.

Throughout school visits, participants should be looking for opportunities to talk with teachers and school leaders. Participants should make a point of asking for a business card and having some of their own business cards prepared before the in-country program. This will increase the chances of maintaining contact and building on relationships for the future. In the event that additional assistance is required to develop a sister school relationship after the initial visit, the association providing the program should be able to assist as part of the post-program service.

Personal Interactions

A good in-country program should provide opportunities for personal interaction with Asian people in order to establish or broaden receptivity to and empathy towards different cultures. These interactions should be informal, unscripted, personal, and may be ephemeral in nature. This is about getting out and rubbing shoulders with the local people.

Self-directed activities in the program give participants an opportunity to explore areas of interest. But they also provide time to walk the streets, meet people, and talk to them. Participants need to remember that every stranger is just a friend they haven't yet met. There should be many opportunities for this level of interaction in any in-country program, but participants need also to look for these opportunities.

In China, for example, participants will often be approached by students wanting to practice English. This is an opportunity to ask questions, get to know something about them, their families, their lives, and their culture. Night markets are also a great opportunity to see different foods, interact with people and get to know something about them. Overnight train journeys are also great opportunity. The author has travelled alone on long distance trains in hard class throughout China and this is one of the best ways to talk to the local people, become immersed in their world and get up close to their culture and histories. For participants learning an Asian language it's also an excellent language immersion experience. Even with in-country programs where travel maybe in soft class, this is an opportunity to go for a walk throughout the train and talk local to people. Participants will be surprised by the diversity of people they meet, the stories they hear and the things they learn.

Value for Money

Participating in an in-country program can be a substantial investment, and this is the reason why participants need to consider the above points and select a program that can deliver across all areas of content, structure and value for money. It is important to realise that a professionally designed and delivered in-country program involves much more than travel logistics. In evaluating value for money, comparisons should not be made with standard travel deals. A well structured in-country program with rich content and an excellent program leader to facilitate learning opportunities is the key difference. Principals and teachers considering in-country programs should therefore seek out the range of programs on offer and make comparisons between these specific programs. A professionally designed, value adding program should include:

- An experienced bi-lingual Program Leader with excellent inter-cultural understanding,
- Certification for Professional Development hours,

- Post-program evaluation,
- Structure and content as described above,
- Real people networks and systematic post-program support,
- Management by a professional association, and
- High quality travel logistics services.

Asia Literacy Leadership

This paper outlines the essential factors that should be considered when selecting an in-country professional learning program and planning to optimise learning outcomes. Educators who participate in a program that meets these requirements should return to Australia as a confident, skilled and well equipped Asia literacy leader in their school. Such a program should provide sufficient knowledge, experiences, networks, ideas, and empathy to enable participants to become school leaders in Asia literacy and agents for change in their school and school community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr James Davis is a founding Director of the Asia Literacy Teachers' Association of Australia, www.AsiaLiteracy.org.au. The association provides a broad range of programs, including in-country programs, and has longstanding international networks to support school links with Asia, and the evolution of Asia-engaged schools. To contact James Email: James@AsiaLiteracy.org.au