Using Digital Storytelling to Create Intercultural Awareness at Eastern Illinois University

Toluwalase Solomon

Eastern Illinois University

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Using Digital storytelling to Create Intercultural Awareness at Eastern Illinois University

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Abstract

Despite the increasing enrollment of international students at Eastern Illinois University (EIU), little is known about the integration of international students into the larger community. This creative thesis employs photovoice as a form of digital storytelling to amplify the voices of international students at EIU. Over an 8-week period, 7 international students from Cameroon, India, Ghana, Philippines, South-Korea, China, and France and the researcher captured images that told their stories of acculturation and socio-cultural adjustment in EIU. The main goal of this project is to improve college wide understanding on the actual lived experiences of international students in Eastern Illinois University.

Keywords: Digital storytelling, Photovoice, Acculturation.
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Introduction.

College campuses and universities in the United States are becoming increasingly internationalized. The United States is the top global hub for academic training as the country hosted a record of 819,644 international students in 2013, which is approximately 21% of all students studying abroad worldwide (Ruiz, 2014). According to Bound, Braga, Khanna, and Tunner (2016) “the number of foreign students enrolled in U.S colleges and universities at the undergraduate level has increased 161% since the beginning of the 21st century, rising from 288,161 students in the Fall 2000 to 428,203 in 2013, with two-thirds of this increase occurring at public universities” (p. 4). Attending a school enrolling substantial numbers of international students may advantage American students in the marketplace, to the extent that the experience increases their cultural sensitivities and skills in working with people from different backgrounds (Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005, p. 2). Although international students are an important source of diversity in American campuses, "relatively little is known about their distinct cultures and extent to which international students are satisfied with their experience, interact with peers and faculty members, and participate in a variety of other educationally purposeful activities" (p. 4).

Eastern Illinois University (EIU) has been making efforts to expand the enrollment of international students. A key recruitment strategy is the International Student Ambassador program that allows enrolled international students at EIU to correspond with prospective students in their home countries (B. Cuellar, personal communication, Feb 1, 2018). In addition, EIU has become a member of the American International Recruitment Council (AIRC), a national non-profit organization that develops best practices and ethical standards for the recruitment of international students (B. Cuellar, personal communication, Feb 1, 2018). In the
past three years, international student enrollment has been fair but fluctuating. According to data obtained from the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS), total figures for enrolled international students in 2015 was 250 (OISS, 2017). This figure saw a 16% increase in 2016 with the enrollment figure at 398 and a 3% decrease from this 2016 figure in 2017 to a total of 377 (OISS, 2017). While increased attention has been paid to recruitment and enrollment, the lived experiences of international students compared to local students on campus has been largely under-assessed and unrecognized. Adjusting to life in college is demanding for all students but for international students, the stress is often heightened (Desa, Yusooff & Abd-Kadir, 2012). This can have a significant impact on the lived experiences of international students thus leading to withdrawal, stereotyping, and underrepresentation in their social interactions (Martin & Nakayama, 2008). Curiosity about international students and where they come from puts them on a hot seat for unexpected questions and answer sessions. However, I get perplexed by questions and the preconceived notion of domestic students about my home country and the continent of Africa. Being an international student with a Nigerian accent, I expect questions all the time. This is the same with most people who move to a different country after their formative years. Despite access to information via the internet, alongside the growing opportunity to travel to the continent, there is still a widespread misinformation about Africa. The misconception is then made apparent through questions such as do you have libraries, Internet, or roads in Africa? And are you from Africa? Africa has everything other continents around the world have, and many of the above. Although access to resources and tools may not be available to all everywhere, many people enjoy the benefits of contemporary life.

Blaine (2000) states “Stereotype threat interferes with intellectual and academic performance and leads student to devalue school and achievement as a basis for self-esteem
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and self-improvement" (p. 411). In addition, the author reveals that it is important to know that, from the marginalized students' perspectives, disidentification with school achievement is a means of protecting psychological well-being from other stereotypic expectations (Blaine, 2000). Within their campus communities, they might experience a lack of voice and a sense of identity as an empowered group of people that represent diverse communities, ethnicity, rituals, perceptions, and beliefs.

"In addition to having to deal with all of the challenges and changes their U.S classmates do, international students are confronted with a wide variety of potential new challenges, language barriers, lack of familiarity with the academic system, immersion in a new culture, and loss of closeness of family and friends" (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015, p. 1). For me, I came to the United States to acquire a master's degree and enrich both my knowledge and self-esteem, but little did I realize the realities of acculturation and adjustment to a new environment would contribute to my lived experience in the United States.

According to Berry and Castro, (2003) "Acculturation is the interaction between two cultures" (p. 29). It is a model that spans various science domains like sociology, anthropology, and psychology (Berry & Castro, 2003). In her work, Chung Pak (2006), examined the concept of culture change under two major areas: (1) identity development for racial/ethnic minorities, and (2) acculturation. Unlike a single description of racial/ethnic identity, acculturation is a much broader measure, which assesses individual differences in a worldview that are attributed to culture (Choney et al., 1995, cited in Chung Pak, 2006). Supporting this stance, it is important for education institutions to make conscious efforts and pay attention to how ethnic and individual differences play paramount roles in creating lifelong and fulfilling academic experiences for the diverse group of international students.
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Communicatively speaking, the internationalization of higher education can be understood as interaction between different cultures. Culture is communication, Communication is culture. (James Neuliep, 2006). Supporting this stance, initiatives that encourage intercultural learning and interaction between international students and their host community are vital. Although intercultural awareness creates knowledge, motivations and skills needed to communicate, it also enhances interrelated sensitivities of different cultures. (Neuliep, 2006) This project emphasizes cultural storytelling. In my own experience, leaving a small town in the south-western part of Nigeria to acquire a master’s degree in the United States opened a whole new world. As I found myself immersed in a different culture, it struck me that certain Nigerian social norms such as showing respect for elders and teachers through formal greetings are not the norms in the United States. This experience affected the relationship I had with professors. Due to the observed informality of foreign instructors both in and out of the classroom environment, which was frowned upon in my home country, it took me a long time to construct classroom contributions and summon courage to visit instructors during their office hours. Cultural storytelling has the potential to improve understanding of the values of various cultures and can enable integration and support intercultural relationships.

In response, the goal of this creative thesis is to initiate a photovoice project that enables international students to self-record and share their experiences. Rabinowitz (2017) states that “photovoice is a technique in which people usually those with limited power due to poverty, language, barriers, race, class, ethnicity, gender, culture and other circumstances use video and/or photo images to capture aspects of their environment and share them with others” (p. 1).
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To execute this photovoice project, participants will use any digital device or their smartphone to capture images that tell stories about the adjustment process in Eastern Illinois University.

The fast-paced evolution of digital media has provided innovative ways of sharing stories and improving intercultural communication. In their work, Pegrum, Oakley, Lim, Xiong and Yan (2014) reflect on an Australia-China council project in which students in Australia and China produced and shared digital stories about their everyday lives and local cultures. In an increasingly interrelated society, there is an ever greater need to develop cross cultural skills and competence. These competencies can support the broad set of 21st century skills often connected with ICTS demanded in the global workplace, such as creativity, collaboration, problem-solving, and digital and multimedia literacies (Pegrum, Oakley, Lim, Xiong & Yan, 2014, p. 191). In conclusion the authors reveal that the project aimed to build cooperation and understanding between Chinese and Australian students, teachers and institutions, to support students in teaching each other language, and support them in learning about each other’s culture (p. 206).

According to Fokides (2016) "digital storytelling is the blending of conventional storytelling together with multimedia elements and it is considered a valuable tool in both formal and informal education" (p. 100). In his study, Fokides (2016) examines how the development and presentation of autobiographical digital narration can assist immigrant students in overcoming their adaptation difficulties. It was found that digital narratives enhanced efficient visualization of thoughts which enabled the exchange of views and ideas (Fokides, 2016). Digital narration also produced a safe and empowering foundation for intercultural cooperation and learning (Fokides, 2016). Similarly, this creative thesis will use a photovoice methodology as a form of digital storytelling to create a space for intercultural awareness.
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Conceptual Framework.

The increased access to and usage of contemporary digital devices has influenced the creation and reception of stories in the media. Storytelling serves as a dialogue between people to inspire, educate, entertain, record events, and pass along cultural expectations (Garrety, 2014). As technology evolved, it began to pave its way into storytelling, given rise to an idea that has been described as digital storytelling. Digital storytelling can play a pivotal role in amplifying voices and learning about other people’s experiences. “It is a way to engage the people in a creative dialogue that will help to construct and reconstruct their memories to get ready to script their own personal story” (Sola, 2016)

According to Robin (2016), “Digital storytelling combines the art of telling stories with a mixture of digital media, including text, pictures, recorded audio narration, music and video” (p. 18). The ability to utilize the Internet and myriad of textual signs has made storytelling an easy process and increased the numbers of storytellers. Recently there has been growing interest in the mixture under the category of multimodality, which focuses on the way that communication structures can invoke different senses of hearing, sight, touch using different semiotic channels which include text, image, audio, and video (Page & Thomas, 2011, p. 20). In addition to the digital features of storytelling, the completed stories can be easily archived and subsequently made available to future learning objects (Wang & Zhan, 2010).

Alexander (2011) lists four components of digital storytelling. First, digital storytelling includes a compelling narration of a story. Second, it provides a meaningful context for understanding the story being told. Third, it uses images to capture and/or expand upon emotions found in the narrative. Fourth, it employs music and other sound effects to reinforce ideas. Adhering to these standards, participants can utilize and select from the wide range of the multi-
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media options digital storytelling provides to shed light on their acculturation experiences. According to Sola (2016) “digital stories are a valuable tool for data collection since it helps us locate the presence of various cultural patterns in the narratives, using language and concepts of participants” (p. 1). Also, the new media products give individuals the opportunity to produce their own stories in such a way that engages the community (Sola, 2016). Since this creative thesis allow various international students to share their story, the data (i.e. photos) may contain varying ideas because of their unique demographics and perspectives. This may influence their understanding of the photo project and dictate or provide inspiration for what kind of photo to capture with narratives that better suit the picture and explain their unique experiences.

According to Jokela, Lehikoinen and Korhen (2008), “Storytelling has a strong history as an oral tradition, but it has evolved and extended to utilize new technological advances and media types as they have emerged including written and printed media and more recent electronic and digital media” (p. 63). Technology has changed the ways, and pace at which, people tell their stories. Interestingly, digital storytelling can be produced easily with the use of a mobile phone. Given a combination of mobile connectivity, transportable multimedia, steady innovation, and popular usage, it is unsurprising that digital storytelling is already beginning to migrate to the mobile phone universe (Alexander, 2011). Supporting this notion, photos could be a powerful tool in the hands of various group of people across the globe to record experiences, amplify voices and communicate identity. The likes of Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp have all focused on creating visual connections of thoughts and ideas to enhance and increase intercultural understanding. It becomes easy for diverse people including uneducated individuals to easily access the media and seize the opportunity to either communicate emotions, difference, or issues that needs to be heard. “Sharing and engaging online in real-time using visuals
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reinforces the significance in self-expression, self-representation and in the establishment of identity" (Clemons, 2014).

Fortunately, mobile digital storytelling does not only hasten the process of storytelling; it opens possibilities and enables users to creatively develop content in any space. This means more opportunities to contribute content to the social web through taking and uploading photos, audio, or video, commenting on or editing sites, writing posts and updating status. The amount of content we generate and consume is accelerated by the presence of mobile phones (Alexander, 2011).
Methods

The overall purpose of photovoice is to amplify the voices of individuals with limited privilege due to language, race, ethnicity, and culture as they self-record their environment and experiences and share with others (Rabinowitz, 2017). Louw (2017) lists four contributions of photovoice methodology. First, it supports inclusion in the college community by creating opportunities to engage with diversity. Second, it creates opportunities for participants to be valued, respected, and build self-confidence. Third, it generates attitudes, knowledge, and skill development for intercultural competence. Fourth, it creates opportunities to engage in conversations that matter and experiences that develop the sensitivity to accept diverse perspectives. For example, the center for intercultural Education at Norquest college in collaboration with Inclusive Student Engagement (ISE) project reveals the use of photovoice to create awareness of the multiple perspectives and cultural difference that exist on their college campus. It demonstrated that it is possible for people to find meaning and discover different perspectives from sharing their own images and stories with diverse people (Louw, 2017). The photovoice project was aimed at sharing student voices and supporting inclusion in ways that may help students pinpoint their beliefs and perceptions, build competencies, and potentially influence college-wide understanding of the diversity. Also, with the aid of photovoice, Haque and Sun (2009) helped create a deeper understanding of how acculturative stress pose challenges for young immigrants in St. Jamestown (SJT), an urban multicultural neighborhood located in Canada, to maintain a healthy lifestyle. According to Haque and Sun (2009) “we used Photovoice to explore how multicultural youth in St. James Town perceive their neighborhood to play a role in their health and well-being” (p.4). The authors collected and analyzed 59 photo-
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stories depicting the lived experience of twenty-one youth from diverse ethno-racial and cultural backgrounds who volunteered to participate in the study.

Photovoice is a participatory methodology that involves a collaborative process from start to finish whereby the participants are given the opportunity to record their own environment and experiences. After submitting my research idea to seek approval from the Institutional Review Board, the thesis was considered a journalistic endeavor rather than actual human subject research and therefore did not require a consent form to proceed. The absence of a consent form made the recruiting process for this thesis more flexible. To engage diverse students and expand the understanding of multiple cultural perceptions

I recruited participants by introducing the project to them by word of mouth. Also, with the help of the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS), I utilized the Association of International Students (AIS) social network to inform international students about the project. Though the initial plan was to recruit 10-12 international students, I recruited a heterogeneous sample of seven individuals including myself from the population of international students at Eastern Illinois University. Participants selected were from France, India, South-Korea, Philippines, China and Ghana. Although the rationale behind selecting a diverse group of international students is to understand acculturation from different cultural perspectives, demographics and academic level could also influence the findings of this research. Three participants were undergraduates and four participants were graduate students.

After the recruitment process, I organized a focus group meeting to introduce participants to the project and inform them about the means of collecting data. Since all participants were from a different academic background, it was necessary to conduct a focus group meeting to
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discuss what a photovoice project is, why they were selected, how to take evocative photos, and why the project mattered to them individually and to prospective international students.

The focus group meeting began with an icebreaker question: How does your identity as an international student influence your lived experience and academic performance at EIU? Though from different perspectives, majority of their responses related to social experiences rather than academic experiences. The reason for posing this question was to incite key points from participant’s dialogue that relate to the idea of photovoice and the broader significance of the project. The key themes that emerged from their responses were underrepresentation, cuisine experience, social isolation, and different communication patterns. It was made apparent through the insights that these factors influence not just their lived experiences but the relationship with and connection to their host and new community. For instance, in her response, Kourtney, from France narrated her reluctance to be socially engaged with groups and sororities on campus. She explained that she noticed a decline in social activities like dancing and swimming which was a major part of her social experience in her home country. Essien, the Ghanaian participant touched on how food plays a pivotal role in achieving a satisfying experience in the campus community. In his response, he stressed the fact that food is an integral part of ethnic culture and the struggle to get those cultural foods is a major challenge for him as an international student. In addition, by naming the importance of intercultural learning, I contributed to the discussion by talking about misconceptions of the African continent, which was made apparent through the conversations I had with host co-students, church family, and co-workers.

Participants were informed of the primary method of collecting data and asked to explore their campus community, take pictures and write stories about their pictures that identify the
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challenges of their socio-cultural adjustment. By taking pictures and sharing stories of people and objects, the participants can notice more about their environment as they reflect on the spaces and people in the college campus, student areas, and classroom to bring out barriers they perceive.

Though I collected thirty-five photos from all participants including myself in a period of eight weeks, I eventually selected twenty of the photos for presentation of results and analysis. The motive for reducing the actual quantity of data collected to twenty photos was to choose and photo narratives that best fit the themes that emerge from the focus group meeting analysis.
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Results

Short biography of participants

1. Essien is a Curriculum and Instruction international graduate student from Ghana. He enrolled in school in Fall 2017. Asides been a Graduate Assistant in his department, Essien is actively involved with Acts Campus Ministry, a faith-based organization on campus.

2. Son is a graphic design international undergraduate student from South Korea. She enrolled into school in Spring 2017. Son claims she plays Badminton with her boyfriend during her leisure.

3. Kourtney is a Political Science international graduate student from France. She originally enrolled into The Language Company (TLC) in Fall 2017 before she got her admission to graduate school in Fall 2018. Kourtney enjoys swimming at her leisure.

4. Chan is Journalism international undergraduate student from China. He enrolled in school in Fall 2015, which makes him presently a senior in the department. Chan is highly devoted and engaged with student organizations and extracurricular activities. He was formerly the president of Chinese Student Organization (CSA) and a staff photographer at Daily Eastern News.

5. Rajah is a Bio-Chemistry international graduate student from India. She enrolled in school in Spring 2015. Rajah is actively involved and engaged with initiatives the Association of International Students (AIS) uses to integrate international students into the campus community.

6. Pedro is a Mathematics international undergraduate student from Philippines. He enrolled in school in Fall, 2017. Pedro is actively involved with EIU soccer pick up, a Facebook group created for the purpose of connecting lovers of the beautiful game across the world.
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7. Toluwalase is a Communication studies graduate student from Nigeria. I enrolled in school in Spring of 2017. I have been actively involved with the Association of International Students (AIS) as coordinator of sports and the EIU soccer pick up group.

In this chapter, I will present the participant photos that reveal their sociocultural adjustment experiences in a new multicultural environment, which is the central research question. Below are the key themes that emerged from analysis of the photo narratives of the seven participants.

**Cuisine Adjustment**

Photos in this category all demonstrate participant’s food adjustment experiences in a new environment where ingredients for their cultural food are scarce in a small town. The inability of international students to get easy access to their cultural foods may increase stress and influence their food choice. Supporting this stance, Satia (2003) as cited in Mustafa (2016) states “The disruption and changes in food habits after a migration may cause dietary acculturation.” By explaining the importance of cultural food, Son appreciated the relevance of kimchi that she usually takes for granted in her home country. Fufu, Amala, and Eba also known as “swallow” are the most common and ideal food from Yoruba tribe where I am from. These ethnical foods are mostly made from either yam or cassava flour mostly and have a product in a dough form. Because they are scarce and hard to get, a common strategy used by myself and other Nigerians is to improvise “swallow” by turning Mashed Potatoes into the dough product which is usually very close and enjoyable. In conclusion, learning more about international student’s positive and negative food choice adjustment during transition may greatly add to the
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understanding of the student’s adjustment experiences.

Figure 1

“When I visit Champaign, I always stop by at Green Onion market to get Korean groceries such as rice, noodles, meat, sauces and Kimchi. Among them, Kimchi is essential for my life. Back in the days when I was in Korea, I did not know how much it is important when I eat. However, here, I really need that for cooking for just as side dish for my meal. Specially, during winter, if I cook this soup, it makes my body warmer. This is legit for my nostalgia and cold weather” (Son, South Korea).

Figure 2
Food is an integral and important part of a culture. A traditional cuisine is passed down from generation to generation. Food also operates as an expression of cultural identity. The foods above are typical Ghanaian foods. The first image represents Rice Ball with Peanut Butter soup and chicken. The second food is a Jollof Rice with an egg. Many International students sometimes feel homesick when they struggle to find some of these traditional foods at EIU, and in the Charleston community. Also, the ingredients to prepare such foods are not readily available in the Charleston community which propels students to travel to the next town Champaign which is a 45 minutes’ drive from Charleston, or Chicago which is a 3-hour drive. In circumstances like this, the international student may feel somewhat excluded when it comes to traditional foods and the access to them. (Essien, Ghana).

Figure 3

“It’s very tough to survive on a different food culture and especially when you are strictly a vegetarian and you don’t have any store up to 45 miles”. (Rajah, India)
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Integration/ Social support.

Social isolation has been a major challenge for most international students in a new environment. Photos in this category reveals social connection to co-nationals and other international students is a strategy the south Korean and Ghanaian group of international students use to alleviate social stress. Supporting this stance, Chen, Mallinckrodt & Mobley (2002) state that “In order to meet needs for social connections many international students identify with a strong in-group community of co-nationals in the U.S that provides a new primary relationship, a sense of belonging, and a vital avenue to share familiar cultural values and practices”.

Figure 4

“This picture was taken in the food pantry, Charleston Illinois. “In as much as international students are unable to get their cultural food and may sometimes lead to home sickness,
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Charleston community do a great job in ensuring goodwill for various groups of people. Although this picture does not include any African dish which I miss so much and makes my experience tough, However, it communicates support, inclusivity and a favorable community relation for everybody that lives in Coles county including international students with a valid panther card. The food pantry is sponsored by churches in Charleston area and they provide three days' worth of emergency food to people of all kinds. On the first page of their website, they have a quote which implies: For I was hungry, and you gave me drink; I was stranger, and you took me in. This quote makes me relate to be like a stranger that is accepted here in a new community” (Toluwalase, Nigeria)

Figure 5

“As an international student, I sometimes feel that I am alone here. However, I know there are lots of nice people in my circle who care me and love me. My faculty, friends, and peers are all supportive and I am really enjoying being with them. My international friends are also precious to me. Since we are all in common that we are international students, we know how much we
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miss our family, and our country even though we do not talk about that a lot. I am happy that I could be with all my international friends as well as others supportive friends and faculties. (I am shy to say this, but I always treat everyone with sincere mind” (Son, South Korea).

Figure 6

“It is easy to build an international friendship when doing a group project at class. Since there is a mystery that “everyone loves Chinese food”, there is nothing better than treating a friend with an authentic Chinese food feast. Under the study abroad situation, every friend can also act as an
"In this picture are members of the executive members of Eastern Illinois soccer pick up group. Team work or small groups are made up two or more people who collectively work to complete tasks successfully. My experience working with team took a whole lot of new dimension which I was fascinated about because of the opportunities it created for me to engage in genuine dialogue and stay opened to differences of values, cultural norms, and behaviors. Though the differences among the members of the group in the picture may sometimes be a drawback for communication, but most time it helped me built my patience and sharpened my listening skills. For instance, playing soccer in this new environment is different from home country because it
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has given me the opportunity to not just play the beautiful game with different lovers of the sport around the world, it gave room to learn about each other's culture on the pitch. In a nutshell, my experience working with team has made me opened, be able negotiate and understand the other people's cultural values and norms outside the classroom” (Toluwalase, Nigeria).

Figure 8

“In this picture, some group of international students decide to come together and have a feel of their traditional food, games and fellowship to remind themselves of home, cultural values and inclusiveness. Fellowships like this builds a strong bond between them and makes them feel welcomed and at home sometimes. The notion of a brotherly care is enhanced among them” (Essien, Ghana).
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Figure 9

"Being a part of Eastern Illinois University allows students to meet people from all around the world, to discover new culture, and to enjoy new food. Food is an essential need for everybody and it is wonderful to discover traditional dishes from different countries. Sharing food is also a good way to spend time with people" (Kourtney, France).

Figure 10

"It’s being a trend that a greater number of Chinese students chose to have a pet. Pets are the best solace while people feel lonely, especially for someone that study abroad. Cat, Chinchilla, hamster, there are different types of a pet being chosen as the pet. The biggest problem will be
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how to take care of their pets after they finish the study. The paperwork is complicated to bring a pet back to China, but for an important family member, it’s worth it. GIGI, an adopted cat live in Man Hu’s apartment, has a reputation as the most adorable cat among all other Chinese’ cats. “He’s such cherubic and fervent, he is the sugar of my life.” (Chan, China).

Socio-ethnic identities.

Most of the time, majority of the international students including myself face identity struggles which may influence their lived experience in a new multicultural environment. Padila and Perez (2003) states that “acclimation is more difficult for those person who must cope with the stigma of being different because of skin color, language, and ethnicity” (p.1). In this aspect, participants photo narratives reveals experience about identity struggles and situations whereby anticipated expectations were not met.

Figure 11

“Migrating to America was a huge challenge for me in terms of sports participation. The tone of the picture communicates both an atmosphere of discouragement and Light at the end of the tunnel. As much as I was discouraged to feel a decline in what I am passionate about, the outcome of the feelings on the long run made life and my purpose even clearer. People have personal reasons for their involvement in sports or a game either to exercise or socialize. For me,
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my long streak of attachment to soccer seem like an undetachable force from my social experience. Asides from the motivation it brings forth to complete academic task, I have seen soccer as a form of escape. Though I made plans to be actively involved in Eastern Illinois soccer team only to discover that my plans are unrealistic due to factors that may involve structure of the education system, national sports policy, and graduate student status. I will term this experience as a bitter-sweet experience because even though it was hard not to see myself where I planned, it provided opportunity play pick-up games at my leisure with other international students which is a form of social support. Also, the experience was a wakeup call to make realistic plans and re-strategize life goals” (Toluwalase, Nigeria)

Figure 12

“This picture is used to illustrate the notion of “differences” and how the term relates to my acculturation experiences in the United states. I will draw analysis from a Yoruba proverb that implies: Don’t use someone’s watch to check your time. The picture connotes differences between two societies through the symbol of O and X. O represents America and X represents Nigeria. At the time I took this picture, the time was 11:12am in the society O while it was 5:12pm in society X. Though we live in a fast-paced world where there is an increasingly globalization and interconnection of people. However, we operate on different cultural
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orientation, moral, and social codes of conduct. This notion of difference greatly influenced my attitudes, behavior and tactfulness in interacting with the diverse co-workers, professors, friends, classmates, and church members in my new environment. Ward et al (1998) postulated that the process of acculturation consists of the two constructs "(1) psychological adjustment or emotional wellbeing (2) Socio-cultural adaptation or the ability to fit into the host society. To solidify this stance, Yang, Azeol & Saumure (2006) lists cultural distance, cultural knowledge, and the amount of contact with host nationals as some of the variables of socio-cultural adaptation. For me time and cultural distance constituted a huge deal my acculturation experience because of the decline of adequate communication with family due to different time zones and a maintenance of cultural values. The maintenance of my cultural values that serves as a guideline to deal with elderly people as a major drawback for me and the way I communicated with professor. Although I had to adapt to the formality or relationships with professor, However the experience was real” (Toluwalase, Nigeria).

Figure 13

“Sad story. To keep an academic success and stay away from the hotpot temptation at home, the best place to hide in the library. The number one difficulty of study abroad is language, behind
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the language barrier there is a cultural barrier. To get involved in the American culture need massive study and try. A group project is extremely beneficial for Chinese student because it is the time to step outside their comfort zone” (Chan, China).

Figure 14

"Although like the narratives of the time and cultural distance, the narratives of this picture lay emphasis on identity struggles as an international student. I will draw idea from semiotics to analyze my acculturation process and socio-cultural adjustment in a new environment. As semiotics is based on study of signs and symbols to make meanings, this shirt in this picture communicate my identity better as an international student with an ethnic identity each time I decided to wear this shirt. The color and the words on the shirt will be used in this story to share my socio-cultural adaptation while negotiating myself in a new environment and culture. The black shirt carries a connotative meaning of my racial identity while the words inscribed on the shirt "International student ambassador" represent my ethnic identity. As a dark-skinned international student, I feel a loss of identity at times when I meet new friends and belief by default, I am an African-American. Though signs and symbols like my haircut and dress codes

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may influence their perception of my real identity. However, most of the perceptions towards my identity is not accurate. Ultimately, this shirt, my accent, and name are the salient communication symbols that create an almost accurate perception of my ethnic identity”.

(Toluwalase, Nigeria).

"Much of the challenge international students face is to find a barber to shave them and at an affordable price. This picture shows a professional barber who was called from his home to come and shave the man in the picture. Sometimes the cost involved could range from $20, $15 or $10. Due to the high price, international students may be compelled to allow their fellow friends who might not be professional to shave them when the need arises. They do this to cut down expenses on shaving their hair which they used to find it more easily accessible and a very reduced price in their respective home countries. This I see as one of the challenge international male students face at EIU" (Essien, Ghana). From the perspective of a black male international student, Pics XII demonstrate challenges related to hair treatment. Hair treatment and upkeep may have a direct relationship with one’s self esteem but the transition and differences in style of a new
environment may affect international students. Fortunately, international students’ interaction with members of the African Student Association (ASA) have developed and created opportunities for black international students to get satisfying haircut at a cheap rate.

Figure 17

"This picture shows a worship service at EIU. Worship meetings in U.S sometimes differ from worship meetings in West African countries. In Africa, worship services are characterized by instruments like drums, piano, organ, tambourine, and the like. Also, praises are characterized by intense dancing around and raising of handkerchiefs. In U.S, not all worship meetings use the named instruments, but worship goes on as spiritual and impactful as others would experience in Africa. An international student used to the instrumental way of worship services in Africa may feel left out in their cultural way of worship when they come to church meetings" (Essien Ghana).

Connection to the host community

Photos in this section took a different approach to the research question unlike the
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narratives of previous photos. In the narratives, instead of sharing stories and experiences related to sociocultural challenges in a new environment, the participants photos demonstrated immersions and connection to their new environment. Murphy (2017) lists four stages of culture shock: (1) Honeymoon/ Initial euphoria, (2) Anxiety/ hostility stage, (3) Adjustment/Gradual understanding stage, and (4) Mastery/adaptation stage. Although there may be moments of homesickness and confusion, but new friends and daily activities will become part of immigrant's life (Murphy, 2017). Building on this assertion, immigrants that master and connect to resources, social activities, and nature of the new environment have greater chances getting a rapid adjustment process. These photos demonstrate how participants familiarize and can draw together the resources they need to feel at ease.

Figure 18

“New environments lead to new experiences. Experiences practically unheard of in my home country. Seeing Drake and the Migos perform live with some of my closest friends that I have made since moving here, was an experience that will last with me, forever”. (Pedro, Philippines)
"A true passion of mine is the world's beautiful game of football, or soccer as the locals call it. I've hardly had the privilege of playing on real grass, so you can imagine that on this day specifically, I was the last to leave the pitch before the lights turned off" (Pedro, Philippines).
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I am from South Korea. There is 14 hours of time difference between there and Charleston. I usually call to my parents around 6-7pm when the sunset. When I just came to Eastern, it was my favorite time when the beautiful sunset and having chat with my parents. I still like this moment for the most.

"Unlike domestic students, I can't afford a car, but Zip Car solves the problem and ease transportation struggles from town to town or that urgency to fill up groceries. This is a different experience and unique to an extent from my country's transportation services" (Rajah, India).

Figure 21
Discussion and Conclusion

This creative thesis seeks to contribute to the growing body of work that explores the complex and evolving interactions between dynamic human cultures and information and communication technologies. "One critical component of this contemporary process of change is the potential offered by new media for the formation of new identities, ties and activities that express and represent non-western values, norms and systems which is occurring as a greater diversity of social and political actors around the world interact and work within and across cultures using a spectrum of digital media" (Cheong, McFadyen & Maryin, 2012, p. 6). This creative thesis focuses on the lived experiences and acculturation process of international students in Eastern Illinois University. As such, it may be considered as a little frame that helps prospective international students navigate and create a firsthand understanding of some of the social and cultural adjustments they may face when adjusting to their new environment. According to Blaine (2000) "Multiculturalism is the name given to beliefs or ideals that promote the recognition, appreciation, celebration, and preservation of social differences" (p. 7). People who embrace and support multiculturalism value the preservation of the separate voices and traditions that compose our communities, environment and nation.

In my personal narratives, I stressed on the notion of difference and social categorization and the role they play in the social and cultural adjustment process of international students. To relate harmoniously and integrate the whole, the social differences of a diverse community should be accepted and understood. Although the challenges of an increasingly diverse world are great, the benefits are even greater because communicating and establishing relationships with people from different cultures can lead to a whole host of benefits, including healthier communities, reduced conflict, and personal growth through increased tolerance. (Neuliep, 2006,
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p. 3). As noted earlier, it struck me that certain Nigerian social norms such as showing respect for elders and teachers through formal greetings are not valued or required in classroom settings and other spaces in the community. Outside the classroom, other places such as social events and church where I mingle with other international students are not an exception to the challenges of difference in communication style and values. Another thing that struck me was the discovery that international students’ experiences are not the same and some might have it more difficult than others. Factors that may contribute to this may include finances, rigid ethnic culture, language proficiency, and other personal reasons. For instance, students that come from a national background where English is not their first language might have more communicative struggles. As made apparent in the presentation of findings, the Chinese students identify language as a cultural barrier that affects their lived experiences and social connections with domestic students as well as other international students.

A key limitation of this creative thesis project was the time line. Compared to other photovoice projects, the amount of time given to participants to take pictures and tell stories was short. Also, I was not able to gain the perspectives of new international student. However, majority of the participants had all been enrolled for over a year and were still able to provide key insights. Based on these insights and the themes that emerged from the focus group dialogue and analysis, I will make suggestions that may be beneficial for the Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS) and the Association of International Students (AIS) in planning events and activities that increase intercultural sensitivity in the campus community. These include:

1. Organize social functions that include both American and international students. This increases interaction with host students and the possibility of intercultural learning. For
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instance, although the Global Cultural Night (GCN) is an annual event that celebrate cultural diversity in Eastern Illinois University, majority of the students in attendance are international students.

2. The Association of International Students (AIS) should sponsor programs and make collaborative efforts with the University board and other student organization to enhance size and scope. For example, International students may be given the chance to compete in pageant competitions for events.

3. A fraternity/sorority type of group that celebrates intercultural friendships may be advantageous for outgoing personality types. International students and Americans would room together and share the responsibilities for the upkeep of the house as well as what meals to make and which social events to sponsor over the course of the semester.

In conclusion, it is crucial for colleges and universities across the nation to meet the needs of international students on their campuses as diversity generates more positive and robust learning communities.
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