

There's a Place for Us

🕒 May 19, 2015 📁 Accessibility, Diversity, Inclusivity 🗨️ cross-cultural dialogue 👤 Tanya Lau

By **Yin Wah Kreher, USA; Singapore**

I was born and obtained my undergraduate education in Singapore, “the little red dot” or “the Lion City.” In late 1999, I relocated to the USA and have had much adventure navigating cross-cultural zones of change. As a Singaporean Chinese, I am often perceived as someone from the Republic of China, which is not a problem or a bad thing at all. It is when I am expected to exhibit behaviors that go along with that misperception that things get awkward and challenging. What follows are little snippets of the faux pas some people have committed in an attempt to relate to me. These illustrations highlight the fact that there is substantial work to be done in the area of education and awareness about dealing with difference.

American White Male prof: “The opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics was wonderful. Those Chinese girls didn’t smile at all while performing.” (Looks at Yin to explain why.)

Yin: *scratches head* [couldn’t explain to prof]

Note: This is a faux pas that tends to happen because most people see me as Chinese, but I am a Singaporean. My grandparents migrated to Malaya (pre-independent Singapore was a part of Malaya) and then to Singapore.

American White Male: “You speak such good English compared to other Chinese. How is that so?”

Note: Again, this is a social blunder that happens because most people see me as a Chinese from China, but I am a Singaporean. And there is a presumption that Chinese internationals don’t speak or write good English. This is an overgeneralization. I’m always amused more than offended to see the shock on people’s faces when they read my writing or hear me speak.

American White Male: “So do you eat dog meat or cat meat?”

Note: This is a bad joke. The perception and assumption that I’m Chinese is associated with the idea that Chinese people eat strange stuff like monkey brains or dog meat. This is an overgeneralization.

International Female faculty client. I interacted with her substantially at our Center’s training sessions. I presented her my business card and offered to work with her. She subsequently chose to work with a Female White designer.

Note: This is not an indictment of the faculty decision. She has her reasons for her choices. I chose to include these next three examples because I want to highlight that sometimes, we may not be aware of our unconscious decisions. In Singapore, for instance, we were a colony of Britain and at times, the colonial mentality remains and is exhibited in some behaviors. Some Singaporeans consider Caucasians to be superior to Asians and look to them for solutions to their problems. It could work the other way too; people may be intimidated by the supposedly model minority, Asians.

Black Female client contacts African colleague to work with her on accessibility issues after checking out our web bios. She was redirected to me.

Note: People are comfortable with people who appear to be more like them. It's human nature.

White Female client was assigned to work with me. Emailed me subsequently to say she was going to switch and work with another Female designer (who also happened to be White).

Note: Same rationale as above.

Invited to a large corporate firm for an interview which was then delayed for some time. At the meeting, interviewers made snide remarks about my being overqualified. I was subsequently not hired.

Note: This happened quite frequently to me and my international friends who were selected for interviews to meet diversity requirements. Unfortunately, I think this is how people play games to beat bureaucracy.

Diversity. Accessibility. Inclusivity. These are buzzwords in higher education. We hear them mentioned so often, I wonder if they lose their meaning for those in privileged circumstances. To me, diversity includes supporting accessibility, that is, the ability to access information and services. More often, it relates to the design of products and services for people with disability. Our [VCU Institute for Inclusive Teaching](#) planning committee regards inclusivity as a fluid concept:

Moving towards inclusivity includes an intention of reflecting on ideas and assumptions, and becoming aware of differences in order to gain insight and transform our practices.

How is accessibility related to diversity, many might ask? Individuals with disability are often not able to participate or have access to information and services because of differences that require special accommodations. When I think of diversity and accessibility, I include the discussion of people with disability too, because to some people with disability, disability is not pathological nor an impairment. It is an identity they proudly embrace and I support their desire to be a community of their own

with their specific norms and values. Society is filled with individuals and groups with different traits, norms, values and ways of communicating, and it may be maddeningly chaotic, but perplexingly charming at the same time. It is okay to be different.

Personally, I was desensitized to these popularly used terms (that is, diversity, accessibility, and inclusivity), because I grew up in a multiracial society in Singapore and race was hardly an issue. I became aware of the need to be culturally responsive when I increasingly encountered these social blunders in America, began working on my [dissertation](#) and [when I first got involved with a planning committee](#) that does work related to inclusivity (which to us encompasses diversity and accessibility).

To be a tad more precise, I believe my advocacy and work for inclusivity began when I first taught a deaf student in Singapore just before I came over to the USA. I experienced first-hand the challenges of designing lessons for her without adequate training in inclusive design. Another watershed moment for me was when I worked with a faculty member to design his first online course. He had mobility and vision challenges, the severity of which I was ignorant of until I met him in person. Little wonder he took so long to reply to my emails! He had to use a screen reader and a screen magnifier which expanded small portions of text, a chunk at a time. With mobility challenges, he could not use the mouse easily. For those of us without any disabilities, such challenges are not the first things we think of when we wonder why someone does not respond to our emails. After all, we scan web pages and skim for content without much hesitation.

During doctoral studies, I joined the Access Project team, an interdisciplinary research and community education project directed by Professors [Marjorie DeVault](#) (my dissertation advisor), [Rebecca Garden](#) and [Michael Schwartz](#) (faculty members at Syracuse University and Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, NY). Combining perspectives from law, social science, and health humanities, the Access team explored communication access in health care (DeVault, Schwartz & Garden, 2011). Drawing from Schwartz's research on deaf people's perspectives (Schwartz, 2006), the team engaged in research and community outreach activities meant to illuminate and address the social and organizational barriers to quality health care for deaf patients. The central goal of the project was to engage healthcare professionals with deaf perspectives on the healthcare encounter, and our discussions raised questions about the most effective approaches to designing and delivering healthcare education in this area.

In VCU, I missed the opportunity to work with the community as I had done during graduate school. I was grateful to be invited to be a part of the [Institute on Inclusive Teaching](#) (May 18-22, 2015).

It is one work project that keeps me going, even on days when I feel irrelevant and wonder what all my 30 years of specialized training in Instructional Design is for. When I do anything, no matter how small, for the project, I feel that I'm making a difference, and I know that what I'm doing will have a ripple effect, through time. There are real problems to solve, awareness to create, educational sessions to design and facilitate. There is a reason why I'm there, in the committee. There's a reason for all those years of education.

When I'm with the committee, I work less at making people understand the implications of diversity. I don't have to negotiate so hard at the intersections. People in the committee have been misunderstood in some way by someone (unintentionally?), have lived experiences of these issues and thus know how important it is to be inclusive and to educate people to be inclusive. I am at home in such a diverse multicultural setting like Singapore.

*“If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn.” –
Charlie Parker, musician.*

Among my committee friends, I find myself. And in turn I can help others to find themselves and not feel lost.

The Institute focuses on issues of access and equity in education, core goals of education. We touch on issues of social justice, stereotype threats, solo status, inclusive learning design, international students' acculturative stress and facilitate the transfer of this knowledge to instructors' design of courses. A week is not enough time to learn everything there is about inclusivity, but we try our best to design and model a learning experience that has the potential to make participants rethink their perspectives towards making their classrooms more inclusive.

At the [2009 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Ed](#), the OECD Secretary-General said:

“The first priority is access and equity... the second priority area is efficiency and effectiveness [and] the third area is quality and relevance.”

– Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General.

Access and equity. These are two priority areas that make me get up in the morning to go to work. If I don't find myself in a position to fight for these causes anymore, I think my work will have lost a significant bout of meaning.

By highlighting challenges of difference that many others and I face, I work at contributing to and becoming a part of the solution; at using education to create awareness. Working on the Access project with my professors, I saw that litigation could not resolve the complex challenges that deaf patients face; it could not narrow health disparities between them and other ethnic or minority groups. Addressing the top priority area of concern in education does not eliminate the need to work on other priority areas. As a learning innovation designer, efforts to innovate and transform education can also serve to improve access and equity. I look forward to a society that increasingly recognizes that difference is not a problem, but a beautiful gift that contributes to creative expression and transformative learning experiences.

About the Author:

**Yin Wah Kreher**

I am a learning innovation design specialist at Virginia Commonwealth University. A multifaceted border-crosser, I believe that breakthroughs happen at intersections! I like to look for the exquisite in writing, design, learning, arts, life; to explore cross-cultural/cross-field engagement, creativity, cognition, arts. Originally from Singapore, I've spent most of my professional life anchored in the field of learning sciences. I write about learning design, mind, culture and life as it unfolds at <http://justywk.blogspot.com>

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Clarissa
Bezerra

May 23, 2015 at 5:33 pm

Dear Yin,
what a moving piece! I share your view that education is a tool for, and a path towards greater awareness, greater humanity. And humanity is beautifully varied, yet we keep on struggling with equity and accessibility issues on so many levels. It's indeed reassuring to know that there are educationalists like you leveraging

the power of diversity to move us forward.

Thank you!

Clarissa



Yin

May 26, 2015 at 4:11 pm

Hi Clarissa,

Thanks for your kind words. I can't think of a better tool than education and communication. To quote MLK Jr:

“People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other.”

Fear, Ignorance, Miscommunication/No communication > Can't get along

I hope more and more I will focus on teaching things that are worthwhile in schools, for the sake of our learners.



★ Tanya
Lau

May 25, 2015 at 2:05 pm

Yin, thanks again for writing and posting this piece on EdContexts. Really enjoyed reading / reviewing it and seeing it evolve. As I noted in some of my comments while reviewing, I found it interesting on a couple of levels:

– firstly, your experiences as an Asian woman in the US vs mine (as an Asian woman) in Australia (Sydney). I found your ‘faux pas’ experiences really interesting – as I am in a somewhat similar situation – although born in Australia, I am clearly of Asian (Chinese) origin (my parents are from Hong Kong). I don't experience this type of bias (or maybe I do, but just don't notice it?!). Asian (women – and men) aren't THAT uncommon in Sydney though, so I'm wondering if this is the reason? (Just thinking out loud here...) Also there seems to be relatively little differentiation of ‘Asian’ in Sydney – to most non-Asians, Asian is (usually) some form of South East Asian – I could be Chinese, Korean, Japanese, people tend to just put me in the ‘Asian’ bucket, rather than associating me specifically with mainland Chinese. Like you, I don't necessarily find this ‘offensive’, but curious – perhaps worthy of observation in a moment of reflection. In this context, I found the specific association with mainland Chinese women in your post interesting.

– secondly, I love how you have transitioned from the broader discussion on (racial) diversity, and unconscious bias to inclusion and a detailed discussion on accessibility. It is often such a neglected area – as you point out – there is a lack of appreciation, understanding and empathy of the challenges faced by people with

physical disabilities in doing simple tasks that we take for granted, like writing an email, or viewing a website. I work for a government agency in online learning, where we are expected to meet Level AA WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) requirements – and I am beginning to appreciate what a challenge it is to design for people with disabilities – and how skewed towards the able-bodied our world is.

So – thank you for opening up the conversation on these issues, actively advocating for them in your work – and inspiring others to do the same.



Yin

May 26, 2015 at 4:31 pm

Context is key, eh, Tanya? My hypothesis/theory is that Singaporeans are not commonly found in smaller cities in the USA. They are urbanites who are used to mega-city living and hence flock to bigger cities like NYC, Boston, DC, San Francisco and Vancouver in Canada. I've been studying and working in mid-sized cities. When I meet another Asian in the cities I've been in, they tend to be those from China, (fewer from) S Korea or Japan. Considering the population of China, it is not peculiar to find a Chinese studying abroad in the USA.

The social/cultural model of disability (disability as identity) versus the medical model of disability (disability as pathology) are concepts I've learned over time in the USA in grad school and the communities I've worked with. I have tremendous respect for what some Americans with disability have done to advocate for themselves. Also, I'm not sure if other countries have an equivalent for ADA (American with Disabilities Act) <http://www.ada.gov/>. But there are forces, social and structural, that have helped over time to give voice to those with disabilities. The best thing is that I have had the privilege to work with and alongside them as their ally. Am grateful for the opportunities.



★ Tanya
Lau

June 1, 2015 at 12:13 pm

Hi Yin, thanks for the reply. It's interesting to consider the differing cultural make up of cities, and the reasons for them.

Very inspiring to hear of your work with people with disabilities – and shifting mindsets and attitudes about disability. Disability as identity (social-cultural) vs pathology (medical) is a fascinating way to look at it – really crystallises the paradigm shift in thinking. Thanks for introducing it – great learning from you.

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