

*Deborah Court*

*Bar Ilan University*

*Libby Cohen*

*University of Southern Maine*

*Orly Michael*

*Achva Academic College, Israel*

*India Broyles*

*University of Southern Maine*

and

*Loraine Spenciner*

*University of Maine at Farmington*

## Personal and Professional Experiences in Academic Exchanges and Visits

### *Purpose*

This article reports on research in progress, the purpose of which is to examine the personal and professional experiences of faculty members from different universities and colleges in North America and abroad after they engage in academic visits and exchanges at other institutions of higher learning. The researchers are based at two United States and two Israeli institutions, but the visits and exchanges that flow into and out of these four institutions widen the field to include Canada, Africa, and the United Kingdom. We are also actively engaged in the solicitation of other participants through professional contacts and conferences. The goal of the research is to bring to light the difficulties, challenges, and rewards professional visits and exchanges involve, with the aim of making such experiences more productive. Improving the quality of faculty visits and exchanges can benefit the visitor, the host institution, and the visitor's home institution to which he or she will return, as well as contributing to intercultural understanding.

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Deborah Court is a Canadian presently living and teaching in Israel. Her research interests include qualitative investigation of teachers' values and practical knowledge. She can be reached at The Pinchas Churgin School of Education, Bar Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 52900, Israel; e-mail: d\_court@inter.net.il.

Libby Cohen is a professor of special education. She has developed a faculty and student exchange program between the University of Southern Maine and Achva Academic College in Israel.

Orly Michael teaches at Achva Academic College. She is completing her doctorate, a study of the absorption of Russian immigrant teachers into the Israeli school system.

India Broyles is an associate professor of education in education leadership and Chair of the Professional Education Department. She teaches courses in curriculum development, international curriculum, and action research in master's and CAS programs for teachers and principals.

Loraine Spenciner is a professor of early childhood special education and a former recipient of the International Award for Training of Social Workers by the Ministry of Social Issues, Komi, Russia. She has written numerous articles and has coauthored two textbooks in the area of assessment.

### *Perspectives*

Most institutions of higher learning see a steady stream of visiting faculty, who may come to engage in cooperative research, teach a summer course, take on a full load of teaching duties, or spend a fairly relaxed sabbatical semester or year. This practice is likely not only to continue but to increase, as national and cultural borders become more fluid and international travel and communication become the norm. This dimming of borders can bring both benefits and challenges. De Frankrijker (1997) writes

Economic climate and technological developments have set the world in a perspective moving toward one metropolis. It will be a long and hard road to find an adequate balance in combining these integrative economic forces with political and sociocultural differences. In this process, conflict rather than harmony is never far away. Above political and cultural vision, communication and management will determine how (un)successful we will be in making this global perspective in creative and peaceful ways. (p. 659)

To help nurture harmony and learning, and to prevent conflict as much as possible, the move to a "global consciousness" (Shames, 1997) must be studied at the personal and professional level of the increasing number of intercultural travelers. Study of the professional and personal dimensions of academic visits and exchanges should be one of the cornerstones of this field of research.

There are several areas of related research. One large study of preservice teachers' overseas practicum experiences (Mahan & Stachowski, 1994) showed that US preservice teachers' concerns about classroom management, lesson planning, and instructional strategies were similar in US and overseas classrooms. This means that despite cultural differences the students saw the classroom setting as similar from place to place. As well, the overseas experience made students focus critically on their professional preparedness and broadened their perspective on schools, teaching, and students.

In Israel researchers have investigated the experiences of immigrant teachers as they adjust to teaching in a new situation (Horowitz, 1985). Research on immigrant teachers may address some issues similar to those visitors face, but the emphasis will be different for a teacher who must adjust permanently to a new situation than for one who intends to return home after a specified time. Indeed one of the best-developed areas of this field of interest centers on the difficulties faced by intercultural travelers, including scholars, on reentry to their home culture (Martin & Rohrlich, 1991).

Research on teachers' value orientations between cultures may also provide some useful information in terms of shared values, which may be areas of comfort during a visit or exchange, and markedly different values, which are likely to lead to conflict or at least discomfort (Chen, Liu, & Ennis, 1997).

As bastions of technical rationality, universities have not encouraged reflective interaction between faculty members (Schön, 1983). This no doubt affects the experience of visiting faculty because, as Fullan (1982) has written in the context of educational change, "Interaction is the primary basis for social learning" (p. 72). Visiting faculty members come to contribute and also to learn. The more isolated they are, the less fruitful for everyone their visit is likely to be.

Finally, although Kauffman, Martin, and Weaver (1992) state that six months in a different culture is the minimum amount of time necessary to produce real changes in a person, results of the present study show that shorter visits can also give educators a basis for comparison with their home situation and a chance to develop new professional relationships, as well as being an impetus to the development of new ideas.

### *Method*

Faculty members from any university or college are eligible to participate in the study according to the following criteria:

1. The visit or exchange is at least one week in duration.
2. It involves at least one official professional activity such as teaching a course or engaging in collaborative research.

Data are being collected through a semistructured questionnaire or through an interview of similar content, depending on the preference and convenience of each respondent. The questionnaire and the interview are available in Hebrew for the Israeli respondents, and these data are then translated into English. Questions are asked in a number of categories.

1. Background information: professional history and nature of the visit;
2. Experiences, difficulties and challenges of the visit—physical and working conditions, financial arrangements, friendship and social relationships, and family;
3. Cultural conditions: similarities and differences;
4. Professional conditions: administrative support, research, teaching (including comparison of students in the two countries and adjustments in teaching style);
5. Visits to schools: similarities, differences, and preconceived notions about schools in the host country;
6. Description of a critical incident that marked a turning point in the visit;
7. Description of how professional practice, professional knowledge, academic activities, and personal awareness and values have been affected.

### *Preliminary Findings*

Based on data from 20 respondents (the goal being 100 or more), data analysis is at an early stage. In-depth analysis, including analysis of critical incidents, awaits the accumulation of more data. Preliminary descriptive findings are that academic visits involve a rich variety of activities, including guest lectures, participation in forums, engaging in collaborative research, and teaching at the host institution. Shorter visits tend to be intense, whereas longer visits result in deeper and more reflective change. Personal arrangements differ depending on the length and purpose of the visits. Accommodations vary from college or university dormitories or small apartments, living with other faculty, or staying in rental apartments. The salaries of most individuals are paid by their home institutions, and a few faculty receive some compensation from the host institution.

A strong and committed contact person at the host institution greatly enhances the visitor's experience and the fruitfulness of the visit. Without such a support person, misunderstandings and occasionally painful isolation can mar the visit. The impact of visits and exchanges is often transforming for the

visitor, and sometimes also for host faculty. New experiences fuel both personal and professional changes. Due to the intensity of the experiences, strong bonds may develop between visitors and host faculty members, bonds that cross boundaries between personal and professional lives and include participation in each other's family activities. After the visitor returns home such friendships continue and stimulate ongoing professional contact including joint research projects and other scholarly activities. In a related vein, when colleagues from one institution come together to a host institution, the bonds between them are strengthened in such a way that their working relationship is improved on returning home. In a few cases faculty are more critical of their home institutions on their return after seeing "greener grass on the other side," becoming more cynical and less content.

As a result of being together in both formal and informal settings, both the visitors and the host faculty develop deeper understanding of the nature of each other's work and of the cultural-contextual factors influencing modes of working.

Although sabbatical visits by university faculty to other institutions have been the norm for some time, the ease of air travel and the speed of electronic communication is facilitating more visits by faculty from more different kinds of academic institutions, to places more distant than ever before. Faculty exchanges contribute to the sharing and development of knowledge in the global environment. It is vital that we understand the experience of visiting faculty and nurture their intellectual and cultural contributions. This requires the collection of qualitative data about this important and relatively unexplored field of inquiry. We welcome communications from colleagues who would like to participate in our research and share their sabbatical experiences.

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