

The Development of Students' Understandings of Social Identity, Inequality, and Service During a Critical International Service-Learning Program in the Dominican Republic

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Introduction

Since January 2018, my colleague, Jazmin Pichardo, and I have co-led a two-week, three-credit Winter term course for undergraduate university students to Santiago de Los Caballeros, Dominican Republic entitled “Global Service in the Dominican Republic and Critical Reflection on U.S. Identity.” This program brings together intergroup dialogue (IGD) and global service learning (GSL) in its pedagogy and practice. GSL works to enrich student learning through a critically-focused curriculum that uses structural analysis to look at the interconnected geopolitical histories of struggle and oppression that foster and reproduce global inequality (Hartman and Kiely 2014). Intergroup dialogue (IGD) cultivates critical conversations among students on issues of power, privilege, and oppression by reflecting on and discussing how social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, ability, nationality, ability, etc.) impact our lived experiences and relationships with one another. This is done through facilitated dialogues carried out by trained co-facilitators of different social identities (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga 2013). We implement IGD on our GSL program to support students in making sense of their in-country experiences, social identities, and their relationship to systems of inequality and oppression on a global scale. Although we have noted changes in how students discuss and write about service, inequality, and their social identities, we have yet to conduct a study that captures and analyzes these shifts. For my dissertation, I will conduct a critical case study with research support from Jazmin that will assess the meaning that students make of their experiences abroad on our January 2020 program.

Bringing Global Service Learning and Intergroup Dialogue Together

This research comes from identified gaps and emerging opportunities for scholarship on GSL and IGD. One of the primary critiques of dominant service learning programs in U.S. higher education is that programs fail to provide a structural analysis of social issues (Mitchell 2008). This failure often results in students identifying the community at fault for their struggles with inequality rather than the systems and structures in which they operate (Kiely 2005; Stoecker 2016). The growth of GSL programs in the international service learning realm has helped to interrupt that trend through its use of critical pedagogical practices and curriculum that center structural and historical analyses of social disparities (Oberhauser and Daniels 2017). At the same time, there is a growing need for programs to apply that same level of complexity to understanding how students of different social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, etc.) experience service learning courses. Critical service learning research has found that although students are able to articulate how inequality is reproduced, many, especially those carrying privileged identities and backgrounds, are resistant to see themselves as implicated in reproducing systems of inequality and oppression such as racism, sexism, and poverty (Endres and Gould 2009; Jones, LePeau, and Robbins 2013). Students in marginalized positions often report feeling excluded on service programs due to program leaders either inadequately supporting their needs or not

making room for discussion around issues of identity and power within the service group (Mitchell 2008). For these reasons, Green (2003) argues for a methodological and theoretical shift in our work:

We must begin theorizing how service-learning is experienced differently by those from different groups and look closely at the gaps between our theories of service-learning and our theories of subject position(s), of race, class, gender, [and] sexuality (276).

This is where the need to implement and conduct research on new modalities that center the exploration of social identity in GSL becomes critical, hence the focus and use of IGD on our program. The literature on IGD has shown that students of different social positions who complete IGD programs are better able to see how our identities mediate how we benefit from and/or are marginalized by oppressive systems, and how each of us has a relationship to these structures (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga 2013). With the exception of a few research studies (see Rose and Bylander 2006), the majority of IGD programs and programs utilizing IGD pedagogy have taken place in the United States (Edwards 2017). By bringing IGD into our GSL course, we may be more able to foster critical learning that utilizes intergroup dynamics as a way to both understand structural inequality, and identify ways to combat it within the context of one's social position and circumstances.

Research Overview

Research Question and Methods

The primary research question of this study is: "How do students' understanding of their social identities, the nature of social inequalities, and the impact of service on social inequalities change during a critical international service learning program in the Dominican Republic?" As a critical qualitative case study, I will utilize several related techniques for data collection and analysis.

The first data source will be analysis of student reflection journals (Sturgill and Motley 2014). As in many service learning courses, our students submit critical reflection papers that track their experiences, observations, and self-reflections throughout the program, starting a few days before we depart and concluding with a final assignment due after we return to the United States. These reflections will serve as an ongoing way to track how student perspectives and ideas develop throughout their involvement in the service project and their participation in the dialogues. In addition, my co-instructor and I will maintain a collaborative journal to capture what we note in students and events throughout our time abroad. Not only does this journal allow us to track significant moments, but it also permits us to compare and contrast what we find salient considering our different social identities and positions – I as a white U.S. cisgender queer man, and she as an Afro-Dominicana U.S. cisgender heteroflexible woman.

The last source will be interviews. One set of interviews are with students one month and three months out from the program's end that intend to capture the students' experiences and the program's impact on them. The other set of interviews are with relevant colleagues, which includes the course founder, my co-instructor, Jazmin, and our colleagues in the Dominican Republic. The purpose of colleague interviews is primarily to build context around the history of the program (course founder interview), and to triangulate how my own observations and conclusions correspond with that of people who carry different identities and experiences from my own (co-instructor and Dominican colleagues). Collectively, this data will provide a robust foundation from which I can analyze and draw conclusions around the process of student learning and sense-making.

Reflections on Research Methods

As an emerging critical researcher in international and comparative higher education, it is important to me to think about how my social identities, my experiences of privilege, and my relationship to the research will impact the study (Khatri 2018; McCabe and Holmes 2009). First and foremost, I am a co-instructor of the course that I am researching. The power I hold in this role will influence how students respond to my questions and inquiries (Muhammad, Wallerstein, Sussman, Avila, Belone and Duran 2015). As a white cisgender man with a U.S. passport, I hold identities privileged by our systems on a global level due to histories of colonization, racism, sexism, and imperialism that are at play in my interactions with students and our colleagues in the Dominican Republic (Mayes 2014).

I name these realities not for the sake of acknowledgement, but rather to recognize that whatever conclusions emerge from this research are not objective truth (Pillow 2003). My findings will reflect the power dynamics of my relationships with participants, and the context of the study itself. Nonetheless, I want to build trust, establish transparency, and encourage discussion on issues of power with my participants (Guillemin et al. 2016). In working towards these goals, I spoke with students about the research before the program, and continue to check in with them to see if they have any questions or concerns. Additionally, I will maintain communication with all participants throughout the research process by sharing updates on my progress. This will include sharing excerpts from my writing where they are cited or referenced (anonymously), requests for their feedback and ideas, and making myself available to talk with them as needed. While this does not eliminate power differentials, I hope it to mitigate them and allow participants to feel more a part of the research rather than an object of it.

Implications

I wish for this study to contribute to several facets of research in comparative and higher education. For one, my study could extend the already growing and evolving work in GSL. In addition, this dissertation expands the purview of intergroup dialogue research in higher education by seeing if IGD can support students in understanding systems of oppression and their relationship to them in transnational sociohistorical contexts. Finally, this research will assess whether or not our program and pedagogy is able to weaken the impact of oppressive ideologies and/or strengthen liberating ideologies that our students carry regarding identity, inequality and service (Hall, Slack, and Grossberg 2016; Kiely 2005). If shown to have that impact, the research and its findings will hopefully support other practitioners in the field by offering recommended practices for their own courses and a framework for conducting similar investigations.

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