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Learning Abroad or Just Going Abroad? International Education In Opposite Sides of the Border

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International education, particularly through study abroad experiences, has the potential of preparing students for a globally interconnected world. While challenging, it is necessary to translate aspirations of global citizenship into educational programs and assessing their effectiveness. A necessary step in such process consists in taking a close and critical look at the challenges and possibilities for the development of global citizenship through education abroad. In this paper, I follow a decolonizing autoethnographic approach to explore obstacles for the development of global citizenship through education abroad. If education abroad is to promote global citizenship and character development, I propose a more authentic engagement with the local cultures and a better understanding of globalization—before going abroad—is necessary. *Keywords: Autoethnography, Study Abroad, Global Citizenship, Globalization*

Introduction

Educating students to become global citizens is a central claim to justify international education and study abroad (Davies & Pike, 2009; Schattle, 2009). Braskamp (2009) articulated the double reality of international education on American college campuses: On the one hand, college educators and administrators at all levels recognize that global citizenship is critical in preparing students for a globalized world; on the other, there is little consensus about what such preparation would entail. Additionally, there are significant differences between what is intended for international education at the level of policies and programs versus what happens on the ground. Such information gap complicates even further the existing challenge of developing and learning outcomes for education abroad (Wanner, 2009). Furthermore, while international education has received substantial attention in recent years, few studies have contrasted approaches to international education from vantage point grounded in opposite ends of North/South or developed/developing nations (Smith, 1999).

Even though it is widely accepted that study abroad contributes to the development of global citizenship among students (Braskamp, 2009; Davies & Pike, 2009; Schattle, 2009; Wanner, 2009), it is necessary to identify and address potential challenges of study abroad programs. For instance, Lewin (2009) recognized that the recent expansion of study abroad programs has attracted financial interests that threat turning education abroad into a commercial enterprise to be pursued with the intent of achieving revenues and material gains. However, there is limited knowledge about these issues. Education abroad is filled with possibilities for developing new generations better informed citizens but those possibilities are not without some challenges.

In this paper I present and analyze my experiences working in two different international education programs. One was a summer Spanish learning program in Mexico, a program intended for U.S. college students. The other, was an orientation program in a U.S. university campus intended for international students. The purpose of this paper is comparing approaches and assumptions present in international education programs situated in different ends of global South/North given that the programs I compare are, respectively, located in the

Mexico and the U.S. The spirit of this inquiry is questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about study abroad and international education through critical autoethnography.

Conceptual lens

Study Abroad and Global Citizenship

In this study I utilize study abroad and education abroad interchangeably, which is consistent with contemporary literature on the topic (Lewin, 2009). While the concept of study abroad is an umbrella that subsumes many different types of programs (Nolan, 2009), a broad definition is helpful because it encompasses the two programs that I explore in this paper. Global citizenship is a complex concept to define. Appiah (2008) indicates that global citizenship is, first and foremost, a metaphor. Schattle (2009) has connected the idea of global citizenship with the concept of cosmopolitanism. Appiah (2009) briefly summarized cosmopolitanism as "universality plus difference" (p. 92), emphasizing the need for knowing about those who are different than oneself, and understanding our power to affect them. Nolan (2009) extrapolated this idea to American higher education suggesting that the purpose for study abroad should be helping students learn that there are people abroad who, despite the apparent cultural differences, are equally deserving of respect and appreciation. Education for global citizenship would involve learning about other cultures, and gaining an increased understanding of global interconnectedness (Davies & Pike, 2009).

Cultural Competency

Given that the focus of this study is on American college students going abroad and a program for international students in the U.S., one particular aspect of global citizenship is particularly salient: relating with other cultures in ways that are constructive and positive. As a result, the concept of global competency is central. Reimers (2009) outlined three components of global competency: A positive attitude and a disposition of respect toward different cultures and for people of different backgrounds, the ability to communicate in different languages, and an understanding of world history and geography. Global citizenship would require students to learn to respect others, communicate and collaborate in ways that are not only instrumentally effective, but also consistent with others' cultural norms and expectations. Given the focus on American college students and international students in the U.S., the third dimension of Reimers' definition, an understanding of world history, is critical in a globalized world where the U.S. holds a place of economic, military and cultural privilege.

In order to make the concepts of global citizenship and global competency even more relevant to understanding international education, it is important to analyze the role of United States in the global scenario. If indeed global competency requires understanding world history and geography (Reimers, 2009) and if global citizenship involves understanding interconnectedness and one's power to affects others (Appiah, 2008), then, it is impossible to ignore that the current world order presents inequities (Khoo, 2011). These inequities have historical roots (Bush, 2006); they are connected to past and present forms of imperialism and colonization. It is beyond the scope of this project discussing whether globalization is truly a new phenomenon or a continuation of previous forms of global domination—as some have suggested (Bush, 2009; Petras & Veltmeyer, 2001). Whether we call it globalization or imperialism, the United States has a privileged position within the global economy and the existing world order (Blanchard, 1996). This privileged position of the United States may

manifest in international education programs and how students, according to their nationality of origin, are inserted into international education programs.

Globalization and Postcolonial Discourse Analysis

The world, while increasingly interconnected through globalization, is divided. Even though the terminology to describe such division varies, it is possible to identify a Global North, also known as the developed, rich or Western nations; in opposition, the Global South is made up by the low and middle income developing nations and the previously colonized countries (Said, 1993; Smith, 1999). Stereotyping constitutes the main way of knowing in this divided world because the “other” is reduced to predictable manageable pieces (Loomba, 2005; Said, 1994). For this reason, postcolonial discourse analysis constitutes the analytical framework of this study.

Postcolonial discourse analysis suggests that past and contemporary forms of domination—from classical colonialism to neo-imperial relations—has been accompanied and facilitated by a system of beliefs and representation of the people of the Global South (Said, 1993, 1994; Young, 1995). In such a system, cultures from the Global South are represented as backwards and exotic, needing outsiders to rule, civilize, or rescue them; the Global North is represented as superior (Said, 1994). Others have suggested that North-South representation is a much more complex process in which there is mutual fascination and desire (Bhabha, 1994; Young, 1995). Stereotyping is not always negative, at least in appearance. There are instances of stereotyping that characterize groups, for example, as having outstanding athletic or artistic skills. However, these stereotypes obscure or oversimplify information and may hinder authentic engagement with others. Postcolonial discourse analysis does not present a monolithic way of representing others, but it points out that stereotyping and reducing others to a set of characteristics—essentializing—obscures the possibility of authentic cultural engagement.

Positionality

Before proceeding to the discussion of *how* I conducted this study, it seems necessary to explain *why* I became interested in pursuing this research project. Given that this study is auto-ethnographic in nature, it is self-evident that I explore and revisit my own experiences. However, that statement tells only part of the story. First, this project intends to bridge who I was at the time of my involvement with the program—an undergraduate student working in a Spanish immersion summer program in Mexico—with who I am—a scholar of International Education who incorporates critical perspectives. Since my involvement with these programs I describe in detail ended, I have learned much about my own identity as a citizen of the Global South and how my experiences of silencing and marginalization influence my academic perspectives. However, I am also an educator who lives and works in the United States and who works with and cares about American students. I believe in the possibilities of intercultural communication and collaboration, while I recognize the limitations of current approaches.

Am I a disgruntled staff member complaining about a few negative experiences? Possibly, but above all, I am a reflective practitioner interested in exploring challenges and possibilities embedded in study abroad experiences with the intention of presenting insights that might inform and improve existing study abroad programs. I am interested in making a contribution to the field of International Education by dissecting some of the challenges that study abroad programs might present.

Method

Research Genre and Strategy

Autoethnography inspired my main strategy of inquiry in this study. In addition, principles of decolonizing research (Smith, 1999, 2005) informed my process of analysis and interpretation. Autoethnography and decolonizing research have several elements in common; chief among them is presenting stories from the perspective of marginalized or subordinated individuals and groups. I will argue in the following sections that I was in a position of subordination both in the program in Mexico and in the United States program. In the Mexican program, I experienced subordination given my position as a student staff member within a highly hierarchical organization. In the U.S., I experience subordination as a result of my racialized status as a non-immigrant alien and as a person of color. My individual experiences with these programs and points of view are at the center of data collection and analysis. The findings I present are first person accounts of my engagement with both international education programs. Consistent with the ethnographic research tradition, participant observation (Tedlock, 2005) constituted the main strategy for data collection.

The three components of the methodological approach of this study—autoethnography, decolonizing research and participant observation—are deeply interconnected. Participant observation as a strategy of inquiry recognizes the importance of what Tedlock (2005) calls the "gaze inward" (p. 467). This is, participant observation no longer pays attention only to what others do or say, but also to the observer's reactions. In this process, self-awareness about emotions plays an important role (Holman Jones, 2005). In autoethnography, the data collection and analysis are deeply intertwined. The findings of the study are presented according to what Van Maanen (2011) calls impressionist tales (i.e., individualized accounts of noteworthy episodes).

Site and Data Collection

In this study I explore and revisit my experiences working in a summer Spanish language program in Mexico that attracted mainly undergraduate students from the United States, and my experiences working with an orientation program at a U.S. research university intended for international students. Given my formal role in the Mexican program as a student staff member, my position was one of limited power. As I will further describe in the following section, I also experienced a different type of subordination based on my identity as a local Mexican member of the program. Smith (2005) suggests that local subordinated individuals and groups are frequently the object of study of outsiders; decolonizing research turns those roles around and the subordinated individual becomes agent in the process of building knowledge. Autoethnography privileges subordinated voices and accounts (Holman Jones, 2005). From such perspective, research becomes an instrument for liberation (Smith, 2005).

Likewise, I was in a position of relative subordination in the second program I analyze. As a Mexican individual pursuing a graduate degree in the United States, I encounter frequent instances of racism and xenophobia. It is beyond the scope of this exploration to list instances of racial micro-aggressions against international students or the history of discrimination against Mexican, Chicanos and Mexican Americans. It is for this status of relative subordination that indigenous research appealed to me as a strategy of inquiry.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

Autoethnographic researchers explore phenomena from a particular, and therefore limited, perspective (Holman Jones, 2005). Despite the critical analysis and reflection involved in ethnographic participant observation (Tedlock, 2005), this process involves limitations. I recognize those and acknowledge the fallibility of the findings I present. By analyzing only two very different programs, I admit it is impossible to generalize the findings or even to make direct comparisons. However, through the logic of analogy, it is possible to transfer findings to similar settings (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) and derive insights that can be valuable elsewhere.

Multiple elements determine the trustworthiness of a qualitative project. "Being there" (Geertz, 1988, p.1) or continuous exposure in the field is a central criterion to judge the value of ethnography. In autoethnography, "closeness, subjectivity, and engagement" (Tedlock, 2005, p. 467) are considered strengths, not limitations. The value of this account resides not in how representative or generalizable it is but in the fact that the stories of subordination would be unknown otherwise.

In order to produce the forthcoming findings section, I employed the principles I have discussed thus far: I applied the notion of being there (Geertz, 1988) through participant observation and informal interviews with other staff members and participants in the Mexican and U.S. programs. Closeness and engagement (Tedlock, 2005) translated into frequent dialogue with other participants to explore my initial and tentative insights and interpretations. Through that closeness with participants I was also able to obtain and maintain informed consent. Informed consent is not merely an isolated episode that culminates with a signature (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), but rather a process of continuous engagement with participants. I maintained that contact through phone and email communication with participants during and after my involvement in the field and through those interactions I confirmed their interest in participating in this study. Given the ethnographic nature of this study, data analysis and interpretation involved personal reflection and evocation of salient episodes. That is why I decided to utilize vignettes that, like impressionist tales, made an impact on my experiences given their "out of the ordinary or unique character" (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 102). The forthcoming section presents my reflections on some of the most salient episodes of my experience.

Findings

Vignette 1: Globalization

It is summer in Mexico City. A bus filled with American students from nearly a dozen different campuses in the U.S. is traveling through one of the city's largest avenues. Like many other main streets in large Latin American capitals, this is—at the same time—one of the most historical avenues in Mexico and also one of the most cosmopolitan districts in the country. As the bus drives by one of the many recently inaugurated Starbucks coffee shops, one of the students shouts "Globalization!" The rest of the students in the bus cheer excitedly.

Vignette 2: Training Session

My role as staff member in the Spanish learning program was "making sure American students have a good time and learn about Mexican culture" a role I was willing to embrace. My perspective began shifting early on during a mandatory training session. The training was not facilitated by staff from the host Mexican university but by one of the study abroad

advisors who was accompanying one of the groups of American students. She, a White woman who had never lived in Mexico for more than a few weeks at a time, was standing in front of a classroom full of Mexican students explaining the differences between Mexican and American cultures: She explained challenges in communication, the importance of respecting the personal space of American students, and how understanding and patient we all needed to be. She also pointed out the poverty that characterized the outskirts of Mexico City and encouraged us to think about how intimidating that scene could be for American students who—implicitly—never encountered poverty before coming to Mexico.

Many of the elements in the training session seemed reasonable; other claims, however, touched a sensitive fiber: "they come here and have to see all the poverty, the children on the streets asking for money and the houses along the road with unpainted facades." Those comments did not sit well with me but I was not willing to challenge them. I feared jeopardizing my summer job, being ridiculed, or at least being labeled as a trouble maker.

While it was never articulated to me directly, I quickly understood that my role as student staff member in the program was buffering the shock that American students may experience as a result of visiting Mexico. This meant trying to create an artificial experience for them. Mexican staff members were instructed to discretely steer the American students away from the "bad streets" and to show only the best our city had to offer. We picked them up at the airport, helped with their luggage, listened patiently to their complaints about the weather and the food, and most importantly, we made sure they felt safe. While I accepted those roles, I now realize that the program was not treating American students as responsible adults and they were not treating Mexican staff members with respect and cultural sensitivity.

Vignette 3: Mexican Night

A long awaited event in the summer program was the "Mexican Night." This program was part carnival and part costume party. The staff was required to dress in "traditional Mexican attire." I remember thinking to myself, "what am I supposed to wear? What does 'Mexican attire' that mean?" According to the program organizers, it meant wearing sombreros and huarache sandals or—even better—mariachi band outfits. Some of the American students dressed up like "luchador" wrestlers; these students wore masks and capes and decided against wearing shirts. I remember feeling offended by the number of moustaches that men—and some women dressed up as Frida Kahlo—painted on their faces. The program could have been labeled more accurately "stereotype night." I remember feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed while taking part in the event.

Vignette 4: Barbeque

Near the end of an orientation program for international students at a U.S. research university, international students were invited to a picnic. The menu included burgers and hot dogs, but vegetarian alternatives were served alongside. A high ranking university administrator gave a welcome speech. He explains to the audience—mostly international students—that they are welcome, that he is happy that they are on campus to receive an education. He closes his remarks by saying: "and in turn you are making this campus a more diverse place and enrich the educational experiences of our domestic students."

The Challenge of International Education

In order to introduce this section, I find the discussion by Wolcott (1994) comparing and contrasting description, analysis and interpretation to be very useful. In this section, I try to make sense of the experiences I presented, in the form of vignettes, in the previous section following an interpretative approach. In regards to interpretation, Wolcott says the following: "interpretation…does not claim to be as convincingly or compulsively 'scientific'…the goal is to make sense of what goes on, to reach out for understanding or explanation" (p. 10). As I suggested earlier, my purpose is to connect who I was, working in the two programs—one in Mexico and one in the U.S.—with who I am today. Consequently, I reach to my previous experiences in order to inform my perspectives on international education today.

Developing global citizenship is a frequently used discourse to promote or justify the existence of international education programs (Davies & Pike, 2009; Lewin, 2009). Indeed we live in an increasingly globalized world. However, globalization is open to interpretation. As vignette 1 illustrates, globalization is often interpreted as the diffusion of American goods and ideas. Some have called this process the sneakerization or McDonaldization of culture (Bush, 2009). Such a limited notion of globalization often makes international contact transactional and superficial—a missed opportunity for developing global citizenship. Based on the analysis of the four vignettes, I suggest three main obstacles to developing global citizenship next.

Lack of Positive Models for International Engagement

One of the obstacles embedded in international education is the lack of positive models after which students can shape their expectations and behavior when going abroad. For many students, study abroad is their first experience traveling abroad or traveling without their families. Encountering unknown cultures is challenging. Additionally, the existence of other models of students traveling—such as Spring Break—may further complicate this challenge. Either by direct experience or by exposure to the media, students may be familiar with college Spring Break characterized by excessive drinking and potentially risky sexual behaviors (Grekin, Sher, & Krull, 2007). Parallels between spring break and study abroad abound. They include traveling with college peers to some distant location with limited supervision (Lee, Lewis, & Neighbors, 2009). Furthermore, the visibility of spring break on media is prevalent.

Research on spring break suggests that students are likely to reduce their risk related behaviors if they receive previous preparation (Lee, Lewis, & Neighbors, 2009). As a parallel, students that participated in the Mexican program might have benefited from additional pre-travel preparation at their home institution. As vignette 3—Mexican night—illustrates, authentic cultural encounter can only happen once we can see beyond stereotypes. Unfortunately, some of the popular study abroad destinations are advertised as exotic locations with "a world that can be owned and controlled by the study abroad student" (Zemach-Bersin, 2009, p. 307). Many popular study abroad destinations are marketed the same way exotic spring break resorts are.

Artificial Experiences

One of the purposes for international education is to provide students with an opportunity to be immersed in a culture different than their own and encourage them to go beyond their comfort zones. Nonetheless, some elements of the experience may short-circuit this process. If the purpose of developing global citizenship is to be achieved, there is need for

authentic engagement with the local cultures. After all, the purpose of education abroad is gaining experiences that go beyond the EPCOT Center model of international education in which visitors get only what they would expect from the country they are visiting based on a set of stereotypes (Kuenz, 1995) and where the local culture is reduced to a handful of trivialized features.

Looking back at vignette 2, one of the most rattling aspects of the training I received from the American international advisor was one of its central messages that I interpreted as follows: "You are not American, you are less than us, be grateful these students come here despite your many limitations." Authentic cultural encounters are needed, not artificial fabrications of local cultures. Smith (1999) explained that one of the forms of exploitation endured by peoples from the Global South is seeing their cultures packaged, patented and sold. Vignette 3, Mexican night, provides an illustration of these phenomena by which Mexican culture is reduced to certain outfits and artifacts intended for entertainment.

Lack of Understanding of Power Relations

The programs I have described had embedded inequities at different levels. At the organizational level, the local Mexican host university and the American program advisors were not equal partners. Monetary incentives led the host university administrators to act like resort managers and provide good customer service. In this context, hospitality and good customer service meant complying with the demands of American students and advisors. International collaboration among universities is difficult to achieve because collaboration is often complicated by cultural, historical and organizational dynamics that are asymmetrical.

A different level of inequity took place at the student level. While many of the American students seemed happy and authentically excited about visiting Mexico, their vast majority seemed unaware of the complex historical relations between Mexico and the United States. One of the components of global competency involves understanding world history and acknowledging tensions (Reimers, 2009). When American students study abroad, they may benefit from learning about the often complex history that characterizes international relations. A very different dynamic transpired in the U.S. program for international students. As vignette 4 illustrates, one of the discourses present in international education is that U.S. students in Mexico were treated as end in themselves while non-U.S. students were treated as means to serve the U.S. students. My interpretation of the U.S. college administrator's speech is: "Providing an education for international students is not a good enough goal; we need a bigger purpose: That purpose seems is serving U.S. domestic students."

Implications

As a Mexican individual living in the United States, I have—in more than one occasion—being asked by students if *Mexican* is a language difficult to learn. While anecdotal, this question may illustrate how some American students urgently need better preparation to navigate the world. Yet, the prevailing models of international education fall short in serving this purpose. During a recent conversation, my interlocutor seemed authentically surprised to hear that Mexico and the U.S. share a border and that *you can drive to Mexico*. U.S. students going abroad may present a similar need. Pre-study abroad educational interventions may be beneficial in better preparing students for their experiences abroad. While many institutions provide valuable information for students interested in study abroad, the curriculum of these preparation programs needs to intentionally address cultural sensitivity and educate students about the complex power relations that characterize an increasingly globalized world.

Given that representation issues are sensitive, it is important for international education offices to be reflexive about the ways they market their programs and the destinations of study abroad in order to avoid affirming stereotypical ideas. For instance, an online search with the keywords "exotic study abroad" leads to actual study abroad program websites advertising locations in India, Tanzania and other locations. What message does that send to students interested in going abroad? If education abroad programs are to prepare global citizens committed to worldwide respect of others and appreciation of different cultures, then their messages and assumptions must be consistent with these goals.

International education abroad holds a great potential for educating a new generation of global citizens that can collaborate and communicate across national boundaries. Future research should explore what makes cultural encounters positive and meaningful, and how American educational programs, domestically and abroad, can better prepare students to be responsible and respectful members of society despite differences.

Most importantly, based upon my autoethnographic inquiry, I suggest the programs I described here illustrate the exploitation of non-U.S. students in the U.S. and abroad. In the U.S., it seems international students are treated as show and tell props intended to educate American on world-cultures. Abroad, I observed nations are treated as backyards for American students to run wild with some feel-good experiences on the side. Clearly, neither approach promotes mutual understanding or holds the promise of a more peaceful and respectful global society.

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