Making Sense of the Borderlands: Short-Term Immersions and Communicating Upon Returning

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ABSTRACT

Educational immersions provide opportunities for students to experience a lot in a short time. How do instructors aid students in processing and meaningfully reflecting on their experiences? I describe the development of an immersion—and an accompanying pre- and post-trip class—to sites along the U.S.–Mexico border. Then, I analyze student reflective writing assignments to see if and how the students were able to communicate their learning.

Keywords: deep learning, student writing, processing, reflections, social justice

Short-term educational immersion trips have received steady scholarly attention in recent years. During experiential weeks burrowing into social justice issues, college students inevitably ask, "What should I do going forward?" Community partners at short-term immersion sites often reply that students should "Share what you learn with your own community." And yet, there has not been a dedicated scholarly analysis of the factors/ processes that enable college students to make sense of their experiences.

In this article, I analyze an immersion trip in which students from a medium-sized, predominantly White, Jesuit university in the western United States spend a week on the U.S.–Mexico border learning about the history and contemporary reality of the borderlands region and the U.S. immigration system. This case is particularly ripe for exploration given the enormous complexity of the topics involved. The longer history of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands and immigration policy in the United States is exceptionally deep and nuanced. In this course and immersion experience, the students were asked to mesh longstanding historical complexities with quick-moving, present-day shifts, especially during the years of the 45th President of the United States, that systematically affected communities in varying ways across the borderlands region. Given the complex dynamics of immigration and the U.S.–Mexico border, one of the pedagogical concerns was how to aid students in digesting their experiential learning and meaningfully reflect on it in their writing.

I describe the development of an accompanying course for the annual trip from 2017-2020, which aimed to prepare students before departing and helped them to process their emotionally intensive experiences in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. Then, I analyze student reflective writing assignments from 2019-2020 to uncover the degree to which students were able to thoughtfully describe their experiential learning through (1) *humanizing* the complex issue of immigration, (2) depicting times where they *accompanied* those most affected by border-related policies, and (3) *complicating* their initial perceptions about immigration. IRB approval was granted to analyze each of the student reflections, and all names that appear in the analysis are pseudonyms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Immersion trips provide short (often weeklong) opportunities for students to travel to communities to explore social justice issue areas (Niehaus, 2017; Niehaus et al., 2017). A variety of studies in recent years have provided evidence of the many benefits of immersions for immediate (Bowman et al., 2010; Plante et al., 2009), medium (Bowen, 2011; Mills et al., 2007; Gumpert & Kraybill-Greggo, 2005) and longer-term (Clark et al., 2019; Keen & Hall, 2009; Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011) changes in students' lives. Scholars have documented beneficial practices during immersions like group reflection (Yorio & Ye, 2012) and intentional journaling (Keen & Hall, 2009), identified the need for reorientation sessions to counteract "reverse culture shock" (Casteen, 2006), and argued that what students do post-immersion is of the utmost importance for deep learning (Niehaus, 2017; Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011). And yet, there has not been a dedicated scholarly analysis of a pressing question: What factors/processes shape the ability for students to take all that they have experienced during an immersion and meaningfully make sense of their experiences through written reflection?

Immersions are seemingly paradoxical. They are often pitched to students as experiences that specifically further social justice concerns. Yet their brevity contradicts with key tenets of critical service learning (CSL), which is "unapologetic in its aim to dismantle structures of injustice" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50). CSL prioritizes three central tenets: developing authentic relationships, reducing power differentials, and fostering a social change orientation (Mitchell & Latta, 2020). Each of these dimensions takes careful consideration and extended time to attempt to enact in the real world (Greenberg et al., 2020; Pompa, 2002; Warren-Gordon et al., 2020). The brevity of immersion experiences simply cannot fully realize the social justice aspirations of CSL on their own.

At the same time, the CSL framework is inherently aspirational. Latta and colleagues (2018) emphasize that "it may be more helpful to think of critical service-learning as an ongoing process that is never fully realized rather than an outcome with a defined end point" (p. 33). CSL scholarship provides helpful insights for ways that CSL principles can be integrated into immersions to greater or lesser degrees. For instance, well-planned immersions can provide space for students to develop meaningful (albeit brief) relationships with community members through intentional dialogue and activities (Jones et al., 2012b; Kiely, 2005). Similarly, immersions offer the possibility of upending power dynamics by providing impactful learning sites for students to learn directly from community members most affected by systems of injustice (Rost-Banik, 2020). Finally, immersions can meaningfully integrate reflection throughout the experience so that students can process, reflect, and discern what and how they have learned and how their learning shapes the way in which they will embody change and grow as active citizens in their lives going forward (Jones et al., 2011a; Mitchell, 2015).

Thoughtfully coupling a course/class sessions to the immersion itself is a key opportunity for CSL principles to be integrated into the overall experience for students (Yee, 2020). For instance, immersions provide an avenue for students to visit and experience some place they (often) have not been before to complicate and deepen their understandings of social justice topics (Clark et al., 2019). And, at the same time, without the necessary content knowledge about a social problem(s) that can be provided through an accompanying course—like the long, complicated history of the U.S. immigration system and the U.S.–Mexico borderlands region—students' time on a short-term immersion could reinforce stereotypical notions of who is to blame for social problems often associated with immigration (Hing, 2012). Similarly, pre- and post-trip class sessions can provide a cognitive framework for students to utilize in their

sensemaking processes while on the trip and offer space to thoughtfully process, reflect, and share their experiences once they return from the immersion (Casteen, 2006; Fiss & Hirsch, 2005).

While the extant literature provides overall guidance on immersion and accompanying course best practices, we need more specific, dedicated analyses and models of how pre- and post-trip practices and programming can be intentionally structured to implement CSL elements. In the section that follows, I describe the multiyear development of an immersion and accompanying course that aimed to create space for processing, reflection, and making sense of what and how to meaningfully share through critical written reflection.

DESCRIPTION OF CASE

The immersion program—a weeklong educational experience focused on the U.S.–Mexico borderlands region and U.S. immigration system—is planned and managed by a program manager in the university's center for community engagement. The program manager hires and works alongside two student-leaders for each site location to plan every aspect of the week and support the student-leaders, eight to 12 other students, and one to two accompanying staff/faculty members during the trip. The student-leaders lead the other students, and the accompanying staff/faculty members, through each portion of the week—communicating with community partners, organizing and keeping track of the schedule of activities, grappling with logistical challenges, planning and leading reflection activities, etc. The goal is for accompanying staff/faculty members to truly be participants on the immersion, just like the students on the trip. In this way, accompanying staff/faculty attempt to reduce the power differential to provide the students an opportunity to feel (supported) ownership and autonomy (Wollschleger et. al, 2020). The week is focused on providing spaces for participants to engage with those most affected by immigration policies and the conditions in the borderlands region, along with employees of nonprofits and governmental agencies, and other community leaders.

Beginning in January 2017, I became involved with the immigration immersion as an accompanying faculty member. My goal heading into the first trip was to learn as much as I could about the weeklong immersion—through the questions students asked, the patterns in the information provided by the community members, and my own thoughts and reflections—and then collaborate with the program manager to create a one-credit class to supplement the trip for all student-participants going forward. The following year, I taught the one-credit course focused on historical and ongoing developments in the borderlands region and the U.S. immigration system. Each student (and student-leader) who voluntarily signed up for the immersion trip also enrolled in the course, which met one day a week for the final eight weeks of the fall 2017 semester. The course content included distinguishing between race, ethnicity, and nationality and how the categories overlap; details about the particulars of the immigration system in the United States; theories about migration; historical changes in the borderlands region; changes in enforcement along the border over time; and politics, perceptions, and (often untrue) fears (e.g., violence, taxes, jobs, etc.) about migrants. The course was bookended by an "initial perceptions" pre-reflection and a pre-trip reflection at the end of the eight weeks.

During the second iteration of the class, some tweaks were made to the course content, but the central change was more focus on intentional relationship building between students in the class. Students on the immersion have a variety of majors, experience, and knowledge about immigration, and range from first year students to seniors. To allow space for more and deeper conversations in the class, and on the trip itself, we spent less time on content delivery during the eight-week class

and more time allowing students the opportunity to engage with the material in small groups.

The first two attempts of pairing the class with the immersion trip were nearly entirely focused on *getting the students ready for the trip* so they could have a common baseline of information, could know each other more deeply, and could be ready to ask more informed, thoughtful questions. Such trip preparation is identified in previous research as a worthwhile practice (Gumpert & Kraybill-Greggo, 2005; Niehaus, 2017). At the same time, we left the post-trip process more in the hands of student motivations and desires. The service immersion coordinator had intentional debriefing conversations with student-leaders. And student-leaders organized a debriefing session for all participants, which included a slide show of pictures from the trip and some of their ideas about "what to do next" now that they returned. Groups of students from the 2018 and 2019 immersions:

- Organized day-long "teach-ins" about immigration issues,
- Organized phone banks for undergraduates to call political representatives to advocate for migrant rights,
- Collaborated with the student body association to host a "courageous conversation" where several students participated in a lengthy discussion about their experiences from the immersion trips while the university-community listened and asked questions,
- Met with a U.S. congressional representative to advocate for immigration policy changes,
- Wrote reflections that were published on a dedicated university webpage, and more.

The program manager and accompanying staff/faculty assumed a supporting role in post-trip engagement, rather than prescribing the ways students *should* engage.

However, for the January 2020 immersion, we added much more structure to the post-trip process for three reasons. First, it became more apparent to us with each successive year of the immersion that students needed more time to process and reflect upon their experiences in structured ways post-trip (Casteen, 2006; Jones et al., 2012b; Kiely, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011). Second, the need for students to share what they had learned in their own communities emerged as a clear request of our community partners. Third, the program manager and a couple of returning student-leaders developed a third site location—meaning there would be even more students, student-leaders, and staff/faculty advisors, creating a heightened need to understand similarities and differences between the experiences of the three groups.

For the 2020 immersion alongside eight pre-trip class meetings, we added four additional post-trip weekly sessions. In the first session, about a week after completing the immersion, each site group spent an hour simply processing their experiences together. Then, over the next week, students were tasked with writing a reflection. Specifically, they wrote about how they humanized immigration, accompanied those impacted by border policies, and complicated their initial perceptions (see Appendix 1). In the second session, volunteers read portions of their reflections to the class in a large circle, and students had the opportunity to ask questions and connect through similarities and differences between their experiences.

The student-leaders then worked with their site groups to identify a couple of volunteers to participate in the immigration courageous conversation, an event sponsored by the student body association. During the event, the student-volunteers sat in a "fishbowl" circle in the center of a large auditorium and passed a microphone around their circle to share their reflections on the experience. Tables with students, staff, and faculty filled the remainder of the room. Each table included at least one immersion student-participant. After the conclusion of the fishbowl conversation, each table entered into dialogue about what they heard using a list of questions developed by the student body event coordinators and the immersion student-leaders.

During the third post-trip class session, the immersion participants reflected on the courageous conversation event from the previous evening. The student-leaders presented a range of potential ideas for "where students could go from here" in continuing to keep what they had learned on the immersion trip central to their lives through clubs, events, and publishing their reflections on a dedicated webpage. Finally, during the fourth post-trip session, site groups spent time sharing about their own thoughts, plans, and hopes going forward from the immersion experience and turned in their revised humanizing, accompanying, complicating reflection. The immersion and the post-trip meetings all occurred prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

In the sections that follow, I identify patterns in the reflections generated before the class, pre-trip, and post-trip by the student-participants in the 2020 trip. Through these patterns, I discern how well the pre-trip and post-trip structure worked in allowing students to meaningfully digest and communicate their experiences. The trip, and the mammoth historical and contemporary complexity of the U.S.–Mexico border and the immigration system/enforcement policies—particularly during the tenure of the 45th President of the United States—provide a perfect test case for trying to understand how students move from experiencing, to processing, to meaningfully reflecting and communicating.

METHODS

The data comes from three reflective writing pieces by students who participated in the 2019-2020 immersion and accompanying class (see Appendix 1). The initial perceptions pre-reflection establish the central reasons students signed up for the immersion and what key questions they hoped to investigate. The pre-trip reflection asked students to (a) identify particularly compelling content from the pre-trip class sessions, and (b) reflect upon their initial perceptions reflection to see if/how their key interests and questions have changed. The post-trip reflection invites students to communicate their experiential learning through discussing (a) people who *humanized* the immigration system and/or border-related issues, (b) moments of physical *accompaniment* with those most affected by borderland conditions, and (c) how their initial perceptions have been *complicated*. The post-trip reflection is based on a longstanding framework from an immigrant rights organization that has a vision of promoting "humane, just, workable migration between the U.S. and Mexico" through five focal areas, including educational immersions (Kino Border Initiative, 2022).

There were 34 total student participants and student-leaders split between three U.S.–Mexico borderlands site locations. Female-identifying students (85%) were substantially overrepresented relative to the demographics of the Jesuit university in the western United States—a predominantly White institution of 5,000+ undergraduates—while BIPOC-identifying students (29%) were slightly overrepresented. A variety of majors were represented, mostly from the arts and sciences, with sociology and/or criminal justice majors comprising the largest subgroup (47%). Previous research has demonstrated that structured coursework directly supporting/ supplementing community-engaged activities is an important avenue for increasing the participation of students of color compared to the White students (kehal & Willse, 2020). Additionally, Jesuit universities' missions—focused on social justice and solidarity with vulnerable populations—seamlessly connect to immersions and increase their popularity for students at such institutions (Clark et al., 2019).

I inductively coded the first two reflections looking for key thematic interests and questions from the students (Luker, 2008). I maintained numerical counts of the themes, which I briefly present as framing for what kinds of thoughts were on the minds of the students prior to the pre-trip class meetings and then post-class, but before they traveled to

their immersion sites. I then focus my analysis on the post-trip reflections by deductively analyzing the ways in which students shared their experiential learning in the three dimensions of humanizing, accompanying, and complicating (Miles & Huberman, 1994). When I analyzed the reflections, I allowed the students' choices for what reflective thoughts they included in each of the three dimensions to take precedent unless that portion of the reflection clearly did not appear to be an example of the respective category. Here, I investigate if, and how well, the trip and corresponding class provided space for students to thoughtfully reflect on their experiences.

FINDINGS

Pre-immersion Patterns

Over 70% (24 of 34) of student-participants signed up for the immersion to be able to experientially learn about the border and immigration issues in hopes of being a better advocate upon returning to campus. Relatedly, many of the students' learning was personal—they were interested in gaining knowledge because of the experiences their family or friends had had with the immigration system (38%). Influential professors/friends who had previously taken part in the immersion (41%), the 2019 courageous conversations university-wide event (18%), and learning about immigration issues in previous classes (12%) were all additionally important motivating factors.

The students were most interested in learning directly from individuals hoping to cross the border and/or who were recently deported (47%), from organizations focused on advocating for migrant rights (27%), from border patrol personnel (18%), and experiencing courtrooms and correctional facilities (12%). Through those experiences the students desired to have better answers to a key set of questions including the following: having a better sense of how the immigration system operates (79%), how it should be changed to be more just (65%), how the system is experienced by those most affected by it (59%), how to be a better ally from their home (53%), and specific ways the 45th President of the United States shaped how the system operates (32%).

Through the weekly pre-immersion class sessions, in which students developed relationships with classmates and learned about historical and contemporary factors structuring the borderlands region and our immigration system, the students identified key topics that were most impactful for shaping their learning. These included recent warrantless searches by border patrol of bus passengers in the city within which the university is located (39%), findings from The Mexican Migration Project (32%), the lack of correlation between increased migration and criminality (29%), key historical details about Mexico–U.S. labor history (e.g. Bracero Program), and the militarization of the border over time (21%). The class sessions further clarified the students' central desires to experientially learn from those most affected by the immigration system (54%) in hopes of being better advocates for reforms going forward (57%).

Most central to this article, however, is investigating to what degree the students were able to thoughtfully communicate their immersion experiences and explain why those experiences mattered. To what degree did the pre-trip and post-trip sessions allow for students to thoughtfully communicate ways they *humanized* the overwhelmingly complex immigration system and borderlands region through specific interactions during the week, *accompanied* those most affected by the borderlands, and *complicated* their thinking about the U.S. immigration system?

Post-immersion Reflections

Humanizing

Nearly two-thirds of the students recounted deep details about one or more individuals who they interacted with during the week *and* were able to thoughtfully explain why those thick descriptions were conse-

quential for helping them to understand the U.S. immigration system in a more holistic, emotionally resonant way. Students richly described the biographical details of defendants in immigration court proceedings, recounted conversations over meals with recently deported people, reflected in reverent ways about leaders from organizations supporting migrant rights, and depicted nuances from interactions with border patrol officers and immigration court judges.

For instance, a cluster of students wrote about observing immigration court proceedings and, in particular, a case involving a man who had lived in the United States for nearly 30 years since migrating to the United States at the age of 3. The students detailed specifics from Miguel's life, including his close relationship with his nieces, the unique circumstances that led him to being caught up in the criminal-legal—followed by immigration—systems, and his staunch feelings about the United States being his only home. Then, students relayed how and why this moment of humanization mattered. For instance, a student described:

> While my entire family came to the U.S. in the late 70's, their experiences were far different from what it looks like to migrate to the United States today. While my parents had their struggles in their transitions, they were and are very privileged to have had an opportunity. When I think now of the broken immigration system, I cannot say that it is news, policies, and dis-course that come to my mind first. Right now, its *[sic]* Miguel…This story unfortunately is not unique, as Miguel said himself — he is facing repercussion for decisions he did not make. He is being sent to Mexico, a country he is unfamiliar with. Hearing his case humanized these issues. With all the politics and sides, we often get lost and forget about the lives that are impacted by these each and every day. Every day someone is impacted by our broken system.

Another student richly described the biography of a border patrol agent who their group spent time with during the week, and grappled with the details of that individual life history amid the historical conditions in which he was living, alongside the requirements of the position of a border patrol agent, and the impacts on migrants' lives.

> I could sense myself and the others in the group wanting to dislike Carlos, and/or ask him the rather invasive question of what his work experience with border patrol has been like as a Latino-identifying individual…Carlos used to work in some sort of factory. According to his response to the question, 'Why did you become a border patrol agent?', everybody in his factory also believed border patrol to be a desirable job opportunity. The wage was steady, and the work was perhaps more dynamic than the tasks with which the factory workers were engaged. Additionally, there is a chance that the factory jobs of U.S. citizens—of Latino heritage or no—were at risk at the time of these day-dreaming conversations because of the North American Free Trade Agreement…In which case, a job like border patrol…might be an appealing option. Of course, all of this assumes Carlos needs a reason to be both a border patrol agent and Latino, which of course is not necessarily true. It also could be the case that Carlos is one of those brave souls who commits himself to being the humanitarian face of an organization that is frequently looked down upon as a dehumanizing entity. I would like to imagine that Carlos and the majority of his colleagues treat every individual they come across with empathy, dignity, and respect. Regardless, it was evident throughout our conversation with both Carlos and his supervisor that, at the end of the day, everyone is just following orders. I could not find it in myself to hate him.

> But I do hate that our system demands Carlos's professional success be contingent on him not thinking about the type of holding conditions or the deportation sentence to which he has delivered hundreds of immigrants.

The students who did not provide extensive humanizing details *and* why those details mattered for better understanding the borderlands region fell into two groups. First, some students provided thick descriptions of one or more individuals that they came to know, but did not cap those rich summaries with clear explanations for *why* their descriptions mattered. For instance, students detailed long conversations with employees of migrant rights organizations as they collectively grappled with what they experienced during court proceedings and intimately described standing in line waiting for a meal with families who bared details of their lives. Second, other students generated fewer humanizing details, but were able to directly relay particular reasons for why those specifics mattered—through relaying moments of realization arrived at through watching Operation Streamline in action (in which the immigration cases of 50+ people are decided simultaneously) and learning from members of a local Native American tribe, whose lands were bisected by the border.

Accompanying

More than three-quarters of the students wrote about instances where they accompanied those most affected by borderlands developments *and* depicted why those moments were meaningful for a deeper understanding of immigration. Key activities they described included walking around areas with migrant rights leaders while they framed what the students were observing, dining with migrants and having one-on-one conversations, and working alongside Mexican residents as they built a home together. For example, a student connected two moments of accompaniment—walking with a leader of a migrant rights organization and listening in a courtroom to a criminal case:

> There are two moments linked together that stood out here, the first being in a park at the U.S.–Mexico border, being able to stand there and look at this wall that had been recently put up and see the border patrol cars on every street around us and listen to a story that Eduardo, from [the migrant rights organization] told us. He told us a story about himself as a young man and the way that he almost became someone who smuggled drugs across the border. That for him, growing up, that was the normal thing to do. That when someone asked him to take something across the border he didn't hesitate, he said sure and it didn't work out because of a scheduling issue but that had it he could have easily become someone in a courtroom…A few days later there was a moment where I felt the weight of what Eduardo had told us. We were sitting in federal criminal court…and watching [the judge] go through pretrial motions of three men who pled guilty to the crimes they were charged with. One of them was caught smuggling drugs across the border. I couldn't separate Eduardo's story from that of this man. I couldn't help wonder what the man in this room's life was like growing up and what situation he was in when he began to do this. It reminded me that there is so much more that goes into a person and a situation, that we can't assume that people are criminals just because of a crime they have committed, we can't know the places and situations that they come from, we can't know what they have been through or what has been normalized or socialized or even glorified where they grew up.

Another student recounted why it was so meaningful to share a meal in a shelter for recently deported people:

> I would say the point at which it really hit me was when we were sitting there, eating dinner and speaking in Spanish. A man told me that he came to the border from El Salvador on the train or *La Bestia*. This humanized it for me because I read about *La Bestia* in my Spanish class and I learned all about the train when I read *Enrique's Journey* in eighth grade. Suddenly, stories that I read had actual faces. What read as colorful fiction in eighth grade was suddenly staring back at me in real, touchable, intractable flesh. It's one thing to think of the stories, but it's too easy to adopt an air of fiction. You cannot ignore the face of someone telling you their story while you sit across from one another eating a dinner prepared in a migrant shelter…It was the most profound experience I have had utilizing my Spanish thus far. It reiterated why I wanted to learn Spanish in the first place; to be in accompaniment and communication with as little barriers as possible.

The quarter of the students who were not able to relate a specific moment of accompaniment and describe why it mattered fell into two camps. First, there were some attempted descriptions of accompanying moments that were quite vague—it appeared that something meaningful happened, but the students were not able to put descriptive or explanatory words together to relay why what they had experienced was so impactful. Second, students specifically identified barriers to the moments of accompaniment that they hoped to experience such as a lack of proficiency conversing in Spanish or fewer opportunities to directly interact with individuals most affected based on variation of the scheduled activities across the three site locations.

Complicating

Eighty percent of the immersion participants described specific way(s) that their thinking about immigration and the borderlands was complicated and/or changed through their experience. Central forms of the complicated thoughts included a thorough rethinking of a good/bad dichotomy in terms of individuals who were to blame for the conditions in the borderlands region, removal of stereotypes around asylum seekers, nuanced thinking about the role of border patrol agents, and questioning their assumptions about how what their time in Mexico would feel like compared to their lives in the United States. Here's one student relaying their takeaways from the immersion:

> Where's the villain? Who did I meet this week that I can blame? I've been thinking about those questions a lot and quite honestly, I do not have an answer. Now this doesn't mean no one is in the wrong or at fault. But when I look back at the bigger picture, I cannot tell you that it is _____'s fault. I do not have that answer. If I go back to my court room experience, I am not only reminded of the heart-breaking stories and the injustice, but also I am reminded of the little power the judge had. I am reminded of the face of discomfort that was on the judge's face when Miguel shared his story. I am reminded of Gabriela telling us that this was the most empathic she has ever seen a judge act. I had every expectation to go into that courtroom and hate the judge. But that was not the case. What I witnessed was a broken system set up to fail people, set up to dehumanize people.

For the remaining 20% of students, some could not articulate specific ways that their thinking had been complicated—even as they insisted in general ways that they felt that it had. The remaining couple of students stated that overall their thinking had not been complicated through the immersion. However, at the same time, they also relayed ways that their thinking had been nuanced in ways as well

through what they described as more marginal factors like the environmental degradation caused by the border wall infrastructure, or feeling as if they had more detailed information about the specifics of the locales they stayed in during their week. For example:

> I kind of already had a certain perspective on immigration because my parents are immigrants. I am against the wall and always was, but it was never because of the environmental impacts. So, I guess this is not really complicating the issue because it didn't really change my perspective it just added to it. There is a lot of environmental damage that the border is causing and the wall would worsen these conditions for wildlife. I think with any big issue, such as immigration, it is inevitable for different aspects of life to be affected. I had only ever thought of the effects it had on people.

CONCLUSION

The analysis provides evidence that most of the students were able to meaningfully relay their immersive experiences across the three dimensions of humanizing, accompanying, and complicating. I argue that the coupling of the immersion and accompanying course—and the ways the course sessions were structured—shaped the patterns I uncovered in important ways.

First, the implementation and development of the class sessions before the immersion helped in two ways: (a) the content provided the students a meaningful baseline set of information to aid them in their question generation and engagement on the immersion, and (b) the prioritization of relationship development with peer students from their site location aided in their comfort during the trip, allowing them to be more present and focused.

Second, the three dedicated reflections—before the class began, at the end of the initial class sessions before the trip, and at the end of the post-trip sessions—provided students with artifacts to tangibly compare how their thinking had changed over time. These successive comparisons were important in aiding students to slowly develop their ability to communicate their thinking regarding an incredibly complex social justice issue area during a tumultuous presidential administration.

Third, the sequence and planning of the post-trip sessions gave students clear steps to make sense of their immersion experiences: (a) the space to process—by simply getting all of their emotions and thoughts out with others from their site location—without needing to produce/write anything, (b) the opportunity to write an initial draft of their experiences based upon the humanizing, accompanying, and complicating framework; share their initial ideas; and learn comparatively from student experiences from the other two immersion site locations, (c) the ability to opt in to sharing their reflections in a larger public forum and/or through small-group conversations with people who did not go on the immersion, (d) time to reflect on the "courageous conversations" event and opportunities to learn about other activities they could opt in to advocate for migrant rights before (e) revising and completing their final humanizing, accompanying, and complicating reflections.

Three main shortcomings to the present study serve as possible directions for future scholarship. First, the central motivating question of this article is to understand what kinds of factors and processes aid students to share their immersive experiences in compelling ways through written reflection. The present data provides insight into whether and how students were able to make sense of border issues through their writing. However, to understand if and how student-participants meaningfully share their experiences with their home communities—university peers, friends, and family who did not attend the immersion—future research should couple textual analysis of student writing with ethnographic analysis of students sharing their thoughts in public forums alongside in-depth interviews with students about how they felt

their attempts went in advocating for immigrant rights through their stories. Second, future studies need to gather other forms of data to more closely analyze the connection between the structuring of particular aspects of immersions and corresponding classes/ activities to patterns in student writing. While I highlight aspects of the pre- and post-trip sessions that I argue were impactful for shaping the student reflective writing, I do not present, for instance, interview data with students or ethnographic field notes describing if and how those aspects mattered. Third, there was attrition in the student-participants over time. Thirty-four students completed the initial pre-class reflection, but that number decreased to 28 at the end of the pre-immersion class meetings and 24 at the close of the post-immersion class sessions. Thus, the data presented above is based on those dedicated students who continued to opt into the class sessions and writing activities we suggested—rather than all the students who went on the immersion. It was an enduring tension to make the class sessions and assignments feel *as required as possible* while also recognizing that the immersion is something the students are opting into and paying to attend. Rather than something the students were forced to complete, the humanizing, accompanying, complicating reflections required the students' initiative. Thus, the things they wrote about were more likely to be items they brought up directly in interactions in their lives.

Only a select few students have the opportunity to engage in immersions focused on consequential social (in)justice issues. The hope is the experiences will be formative for those students, but also that their learning will have a broader impact through their communication and action post-immersion. This article provides an initial model for how to aid the processing and reflection necessary to make sense of all the experiential learning happening during an intensive week. Future scholarly efforts should evaluate different kinds of frameworks that could help to burrow into the enduring questions regarding the kinds of activities, the time between those activities, and the overall time that elapses post-immersion that is ideal for students to be able to thoughtfully communicate their learning in hopes of contributing to a more just and equitable world.

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Appendix 1. Guidelines for Three Immersion Reflection Assignments

Initial Perceptions Pre-Reflection

Around one single-spaced page reflecting on the following questions: Why did you sign up for the immersion? What are you most interested in related to immigration and the U.S.–Mexico border? What do you hope to gain from the experience? What key questions do you hope to answer?

Pre-Trip Reflection

Part 1

Identity three particularly compelling specific portions of readings, videos, or podcasts from the class.

For each compelling item, write one paragraph in which you: First, identify and describe the compelling item in concrete detail. Second, describe why you find the item so intriguing. Third, reflect on the item you described. What thoughts or questions does this item bring to mind for you?

This section should be three paragraphs total. The items you identify should be from three different readings/videos/podcasts.

Part 2

Look back over your "Initial Perceptions Writing Assignment." After reading, talking, and thinking about immigration-issues over the last several weeks, answer the following: What questions do you hope to investigate on the immersion trip? If these are different questions from what you wrote about in your "initial perceptions" assignment, explain from where the new questions emerged. If they are the same questions as before, explain why these questions remain for you. If you need to look at your initial perceptions writing assignment, let me know and I'll share it with you.

Post-Trip Reflection

Please focus your reflection around three areas. First, write about a person/people that helped you to humanize some part of the immigration system and/or border-related issues (Ex: border agents, migrants, nonprofit employees, attorneys, judges, community members, etc. Second, describe moments of accompaniment between you and those that are most affected by border-related issues (Ex: having a meal with migrant(s), walking with a migrant(s), cooking a meal together, building a house, etc.). Third, describe ways your initial perceptions about immigration and/or the border have been complicated (Ex: Before the trip I thought _____, now I think _____ and here is why…).

A few tips/suggestions. First, write about fewer examples, deeper. Second, be detailed. Imagine you are trying to describe something to someone who was not with you that week, because most in our class were not. Third, everyone should be able to come up with examples of humanizing and complicating. Depending on your site, you may not have a perfect example of accompanying. Still try. Fourth, at the end of each portion, be sure to explain why what you relayed was meaningful to you.