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Cover Page Footnote

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Reimagining Scripts for Human and Environmental Justice in Experiential Learning

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Background

In this article, we[1] discuss a co-taught course on social and environmental justice in Pakwach, Uganda. One of the goals of the course was to design a learning framework that situated students as agents of change. We aimed to explicitly link alternative course structures, pedagogy, and student agency with social and environmental justice outcomes. We thought of our pedagogical work as an invitation to disrupt the ways in which students traditionally had gone about their learning, either through structures we suggested, or through structures they developed on their own. Our task was to remain open to and supportive of alternative approaches and forms of engagement that emerged through their project collaborations. This mindset afforded students the opportunity to choose the sites and modes of their connection with the course projects, to exercise agency in determining where and how their learning would occur, while remaining responsible to their groups and to their collaboratively defined goals regarding the broader environmental justice project.

In hindsight, we intentionally destabilized traditional classroom scripts—dominant patterns and interactions that undermine student agency in classrooms—to make way for something new—to rewrite and/or replace those scripts. Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson (1995) explain that disrupting scripts can foster an "unscripted third space," where deeper communication and learning opportunities occur (p. 465).[2] Retrospectively, we came to understand this disruptive approach as an act of *descripting*.

This case illustrates how descripting--in our case, fostering students' agency-- helped us to shift from a focus on effective instruction and grades to a focus on student agency and varied kinds of learning and on authentic assessment. In what follows, we contextualize our approaches in the literature of alternative pedagogies and examine student learning as articulated in their reflective writing. The analysis and discussion ultimately provide a conceptual framework we refer to as GORP (Gravity, Ownership, Relationships, and Place/Space) from which similarly interested instructors might benefit.

Problem Statement and Questions

Effective orientation to justice requires the capacity to step away from positions of privilege and make space for other voices and perspectives. As co-developers of the course, we believed a similar transformation of classroom power dynamics—what we now understand as an equity- and justice-centered approach[3]—might change the way students engaged with the challenges of conservation, as well as the challenges of claiming agency in the classroom and making tangible contributions to social justice issues, leading us to these questions:

1. What classroom dynamics and circumstances model, enact, and encourage equity-centered social justice engagement?

2. What classroom dynamics and circumstances support student engagement in environmental justice work?

We worked toward approaches that would open opportunities for students to function in the classroom and in the world that they had not thought available to them.

Theoretical Framework and Literature on Pedagogical Approaches

We recognized that an interrogation of classroom scripts had to begin with our own pedagogical practices and assumptions. Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson

(1995) identified the ways in which, regardless of their training or background, instructors typically teach according to their cultural values and professional experiences. In such teaching and learning relationships, instructors deliver knowledge, and students who demonstrate (through summative and formative assessments) that they've retained or applied knowledge receive a high course grade. Descripting is tied to the concept of third space, a post-colonial theory with a rich theoretical history (Bhabha,2004; Soja,1996; hooks, 2008). Applying the concept to classrooms, Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson (1995) explain "It is in this unscripted third space that student and teacher cultural interests, or internal dialogizations, become available to each other, where actual cross-cultural communication is possible" (p. 465). Thus, third space allows for what Soja (1996) terms "radical openness," or what we interpret as an openness toward co-created frameworks for learning that are both emergent and transformative, and which produce patterns that are repeatable in other institutional contexts. We saw justice-oriented practices as democratizing practices -- they required that we undid the hierarchies that dictated interaction, both in society and in classrooms. Furthermore, there are indications that radical openness in the classroom can lead to patterns of open interaction in other contexts (Hytten, 2017).

The syllabus. As the course instructors began creating a syllabus, we recognized that our own scripts (i.e., disciplinary, training, assessment techniques, values) had the potential to surface in syllabus policies, procedures, and design (for a robust discussion of syllabus design and equity, see Luke, Woods, & Weir, 2013). Descripting the syllabus meant resisting detailed descriptions of course activities and outcomes. We defined these only generally, creating space for the role of students as co-creators. While each of the faculty responded differently to this approach, it pushed us toward radically reimagining course dynamics and outcomes throughout the semester.

Pedagogical patterns. Combined with our attempts at reimagining, we aligned with familiar aspects of experiential learning. We adopted a mindset open both to using a method we knew could be transformative and to actively descripting our individual conceptualizations of how experiential education worked. For example, we aligned with John Dewey's (1986) concept of a concrete learning experience followed by a period of reflection to create learning moments for individuals. Additionally, Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning informed learning patterns. Yet we refocused these approaches to foster learners' agency and support collaborative project creation processes, simultaneously descripting and co-creating a shared script would lead to desired socioemotional, affective, and interpersonal outcomes (Heinrich & Green, 2020).

Assessment. To further facilitate descripting, faculty assessed learning by modifying a process of learning documentation used in early childhood education. The model found in Reggio Emilia (see Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2011) centers an emergent experiential curriculum, where student interest drives content delivery, and assessment is based on teachers' documentation of learning. The teacher then displays back to the learner what the learner did and how, providing a metacognitive/experiential lens. In the course, evaluation of learning was conducted through instructor observations about teamwork, content delivery, and event management. We shifted from instructor-defined learning goals toward team-defined projects (Maki, 2012). Formative assessment for student improvement during the course included insights and feedback on collaboration, work products, and reflective writing.

Methodological Approach

We collected student interaction and activity notes, student reflections, and course documents (i.e., the syllabus, schedule, agendas presented in class, & course products) to track how students responded to the scripts presented to them, and how they managed to shift those scripts toward their own goals, as well as how instructors themselves adapted to student learning (Table 1). In this way we modeled the justice orientation of the classroom (Rend´on , 2009). As we drew on postcolonial frameworks in planning and implementation, we understood the need to use reflexive research approaches

Table 1: Data Types

DATA TYPE	AMOUNT	FREQUENCY
Participant Observations	14/16 weeks over semester	Bi-weekly
Course Documents	Syllabus, assignments/readings, planning documents	Used throughout course
Student Reflections	87 artifacts/114 possible (76%)	Submitted bi-weekly
Anonymous Midterm Student Feedback	16/19 students submitted feedback (84%)	Submitted at mid-term

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To understand the outcomes and potential of this experimental course, we interrogated the ways in which scripts and learning were reciprocally reoriented through interactions in the classroom, reflection, and feedback.

Analytical Methods

This study has been determined to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d) 1 by the IRB at Michigan State University. We began by hand coding all reflection data (87 artifacts out of 114 possible, 76% submission rate) using open coding thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The average length of reflections was 720 words. Final reflections averaged 2000 words. To create codes, we divided the reflections in half, read them through once, and highlighted emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We discussed our first round of coding, then scanned for agreement and each analyzed the artifacts we had not previously analyzed. Finally, we each reread all the artifacts, then discussed salient themes and clusters across the data.

Results

Through this analysis, we identified four pedagogy-related themes evinced in students' reflections – 'Gravity', 'Ownership', 'Relationship', and 'Place', which we call the 'GORP' framework – described in Table 2.

Gravity

In this class, students defined goals to address social and environmental justice in Pakwach, Uganda. In their reflections, 17/19 students noted the gravity--real-world significance leading to student investment-- of this problem as central to their learning

> [T]his course…emphasizes capacity building both in Pakwach and here on campus. We took the skills and abilities that we already possessed and put them to use in a new learning environment. The realities of this course and the livelihoods that depended on us succeeding has ingrained those lessons into my brain.
> -Student R.

At the same time, the focus on the external project pushed students beyond a grade/evaluation reward structure, and some students were highly cognizant about this approach.

> [T]he work that we do doesn't just end with the final exam, but extends beyond the classroom into the real world where we can make an impact, solve problems, and change society for the better.
> - Student G.

The external reality of needs in Packwach provided ways for students to imagine possibilities beyond what is traditionally planned in classrooms. Built on an ungraded engagement with the issues it introduced, Gravity was actualized by the de-scripted/re-scripted student-defined projects and individual students' responsibilities to the success of this social and environmental justice project.

Ownership

15/19 reflections referred to the ways students exercised ownership individually, in teams, and as a classroom community in conversation with the larger conservation project community. Ownership emerged when students designed their own approaches to the shared problem and then developed delivery and accountability patterns.

> My team was in charge of planning two events…the Mordecai Ogada book event and the Spring Soiree. For these events, we split up to conquer tasks. The [book] event was student-run aside from presentations by faculty and Dr. Ogada himself. I think this ownership of the project continued to show until the end of the semester.
> - Student H.

> [T]he class was set up as groups of teams that come up with their own goals and are self-driven. Having an environment like that I think makes people uncomfortable, and maybe some have trouble conceiving the thought of not being strictly directed and given the freedom to pursue ideas.
> - Student A.

Table 2: GORP Framework

THEME	DESCRIPTION
Gravity	Indicates the real-world significance of the course's central theme or focus (human and wildlife sustainability through redefined conservation approaches, in this case), but also to the shifted model of assessment, away from grades and toward formative feedback on student-defined projects, to increase students' legitimate investment.
Ownership	(Setting expectations for) Student responsibility to define their own projects and goals, to assess their own successes and challenges within those frameworks, and to refine or redefine their next projects and goals in response.
Relationship	Refers to the effect of descripting traditional classroom hierarchies, which opens a range of peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor interactions -- ones marked by mutual respect, recognition of pertinent competencies, and trust.
Place	Draws attention to the real-world sites of the course, including Uganda, the public book discussion event, and the soirée, and to the space of the classroom, which was structured for flexible, fluid, student-driven interactions.

The final event was initially imagined as a gallery show, but that was not feasible. Students reimagined the idea and produced a soiree. The concrete planning needs of the event added some clarity to the work of the students.

> [T]he Soiree was very powerful and thought provoking. From the duo student speeches, to seeing Emmanuel perform, and the unveiling of the giraffe, the whole evening was just very inspiring and unforgettable. This class teaches you invaluable hands-on skills that [are] hard to be taught in a regular textbook pencil paper environment.
> - Student S.

Relationships

We observed students actively engaged in varied and dynamic learning relationships when overt power differentials were modified in this course. Such an approach, whereby dominant power relationships are disrupted in the interest of increasing inclusive participation, can lead to social justice outcomes.

15/19 students noted how their different skills emerged through collaborative relationships with peers and instructors. Instructors developed coaching-centered relationships with students to encourage them to take the lead in production. Trust between students and faculty helped create a novel learning experience. Student V. commented:

> The interaction of professors with students and the passion for all the work they had done to make it happen felt authentic." At the same time, Student H. noted "Our first challenge was learning how to trust each other and understand how to best work together.

Relationships naturally have some vulnerability and sharing, but group work in courses does not usually result in solutions to frustrating moments.

> For *Value Chain* [workgroup] in particular, each faculty member wanted something different from us. We were stressed from the attempt of trying to please everyone until our coach instructed us to step back and decide what realistically we as a team were capable of completing in one semester.
> -Student N.

Feedback, not authority, influenced decisions of teams to move forward with work, and how work would be completed.

> Whenever we were stuck on a problem, we always had coaches to help us out and give us their professional opinion, but in a much more intimate setting. [O]ur professors weren't just a professor, they were there as supporters and mentors as well.
> - Student L.

Place and Space

Place and space emerged as an important component of learning for 13/19 students in this course, creating space and models for the cognitive flexibility needed to execute a complex project. Both aspects of Place/Space were oriented toward social justice, and the Pakwach project was also linked to environmental justice.

Space of the project and embedded techniques are both familiar and disorienting. A student in the course reported (anonymously):

> I still don't understand the meaning of the word scrum, but I do like reporting out. It helps to know what other teams are working on so that my team can figure out what our next steps should be.

Intellectual space in the classroom was also networked through organized relationships. In short, the project extended the classroom space to the Snares to Wares initiative.

> This sprint has been different from the previous ones due to the increased involvement of entities outside the Snares to Wares course. I really want to plan the space at the Broad [Museum] (the location for Soiree) to emulate the message of the initiative.
> - Student S.

Another student offered their perspective (anonymously) on the connection to Uganda:

> The fact that this initiative focuses on creating jobs for villages in Uganda to thrive and proliferate gets me very excited. This is genuinely productive work and designing a helping hand is always something to be insanely excited about.

The classroom modeled flexible learning in a very visible way. Students accepted the problem(s) and claimed the space as 'theirs'. At the same time, instructors aimed to invite participation, introduce constraints, and encourage agency -- aspects of the radical openness offered by the course structure (Soja, 1996). Students responded by collaborating among and between teams to create and implement solutions.

Discussion

Pedagogical Frameworks Toward Justice Orientation

In initiating paths toward justice-oriented teaching

this course created circumstances and opportunities for both instructors and students to descript -- to step away from traditional hierarchies and explore new roles and forms of classroom interaction -- modeling both social justice and democratization-oriented pedagogies (Soja, 1996). Our analyses of student engagement, learning, and metacognition led us to identify student-generated counterscripts.

Learning in a GORP classroom looked different than in a traditional classroom, and it emerged in unexpected forms, in part due to the topic, pedagogies, and assessment approach (gravity). For example, when students set priorities for work (ownership), the pace of work also changed. Students, in turn, needed 'just-in-time' feedback (relationship) on the artifacts they were developing. We also found instructors needed to be prepared to recognize, acknowledge, and pivot as students requested specific kinds of feedback to support individual and team goals.

Because the teacher-centered classroom is a part of the traditional script, with controls over the forms of relationship, movement, and interaction, reconfiguring the learning space was an approach to de-scripting this learning space. GORP's idea of 'place' involves real-world interactions, projects, and outcomes, while relying on the classroom space itself. We leveraged lessons on place-based learning in both physical and virtual environments (Lansiquot & MacDonald, 2018).

"Although accountability remains important, what students are accountable for is what actually changed."

The community of Pakwach, Uganda provided a specific location as the object of the course, reinforcing the gravity.[4] The campus location in which the course was offered—a non-standard, flexible design space, with no fixed 'front'—added to the strength of place-based learning for exploring ethics with interdisciplinary approaches (Goralnik et al., 2012). GORP scripts benefitted from a space that could accommodate a range of learning behaviors. As they introduced the course, the instructors signaled the physical space and experience would be different from a traditional front-facing classroom, thereby modeling and enabling *descripted* interactions.[5] While lectures[6] and knowledge sharing took place early on, the course later pivoted to iterative design sprints. Students, in turn, exercised agency and reconfigured the furniture toward redefined modes of learning and interaction—ones that would deepen the 'gravity' of the course, transform 'relationships,'[7] and create new opportunities for 'ownership' of course projects and outcomes.[8]

Assessment as Social Justice

To effectively expand opportunities for student agency, instructors must move beyond merely stepping away from traditional scripts, but also learn to match assessment and feedback methods to student outcomes and transformative learning (Nilson, 2015). A GORP script requires assessment work to be responsive to student strategies and the work they prioritize for that day—evidence of both 'gravity' and 'ownership'. With each day in the course functioning differently, instructors must focus on supporting emergent processes, and defining ways of assessing these dynamic, 'de-scripted' interactions.[9] Responsive assessment which honors the individual and group contributions, in turn, serves as a model for students who are learning how to be engaged social justice actors.

Students' series of reflective documents led to insights on student learning. Initial reflections created artifacts for instructors to see metacognitive development. From initial artifacts, instructors responded by acknowledging and displaying student learning, then encouraging a pivot toward new/emergent topics and content. By engaging in responsive praxis, students drove opportunities for emergent learning and asked for feedback, which in turn required new assessment strategies. Students' reflective artifacts strongly suggested that, had instructors not yielded overt control over content and outcomes, students would not have exerted as much 'ownership' over the outcomes of the work or embraced the 'gravity' of the course experience. Their reflections thus encouraged instructors to recognize different indicators of success, as when gravity and place served to reinforce student agency in making change and when ownership and relationships were mutually supportive of trust in new respective roles. When students took initiative, asked new questions, and related to instructors as consultants in co-creation rather than sole knowledge experts, they actively redefined relationships and ownership within teams and with instructors.

Although accountability remains important, what students are accountable for is what actually changed. Instructors needed to develop the kinds of work and assessment processes that would document the kinds of learning they were observing, which we now see as akin to specifications grading practices (Nilson, 2015). Instructors and students alike shifted their perspectives, and some evidence indicates shifts in their identities as learners and teachers. Shifts were built upon the different kinds of emergent relation-

ships in these interactions. As students responded to the pull of the course's 'gravity' and accepted 'ownership' of projects, they also reconceptualized relationships with support of instructors, to which they were also accountable. By being seen as change agents, students learned to see the deep needs of their communities and stakeholders. GORP assessment was holistic and recognized interdisciplinary learning outcomes. In our case, we learned to evaluate how individual students were accountable to their teams, to team-defined goals, and external stakeholders. We think these are universal for the GORP approach.

Implications for Experiential Learning

GORP, a remixed script linking together the themes of Gravity, Ownership, Relationship, and Place (space), can also be understood as an integrated conceptual framework for approaching course design and student learning focused on students' agency and justice outcomes. We believe it can support social and environmental justice pedagogies in a variety of institutional contexts. However, we caution against relying on GORP concepts alone. To work with GORP in different institutional contexts, we believe it is helpful to understand these concepts as a series of intellectual moves that, when pursued as a holistic pedagogy, contribute to more inclusive and equitable learning spaces.

As these themes suggest, a GORP script is open, process-oriented, and fluid, requiring attention to emergent learning of both instructor(s) and students. GORP has not, however, been deployed in a way that would reveal how well students from underrepresented backgrounds in higher education react to de-scripting or rescripting approaches. From the standpoint of student success, there is both potential and risk in such approaches. Paradoxically, students already disadvantaged in a higher education context, such as first-generation students, might experience an intensified sense of dislocation when traditional scripts are replaced with a more student-driven approach, even as these new approaches aim to flatten damaging and alienating power dynamics in the classroom. For a similar model to work in other contexts, it is imperative for planners to design conducive environments with conditions for student ownership and critical emergent learning (Hytten, 2017) while planning time to assess for learning by close observation and through coaching, conversations, and more traditional written feedback.

Conclusion

The GORP framework suggests that when traditional classroom structures are actively descripted, students may take up this invitation to engage, and instructors can respond by assessing learning in a responsive way, and help students see what they are learning. We must also consider the broader implications of GORP in course design and assessment in a time of needed attention to justice-focused diversity, equity, inclusion, and/or decolonization in higher education. In attempting to engage in descripted learning interactions or at least to create different scripts, students and instructors can become conscious of new approaches to social justice in the classroom, and student reflections yield evidence of change.[10] We believe GORP has the potential to guide new curricular structures (along with content changes) that will contribute effectively to creating more inclusive, equitable course experiences and more sustainable engagement with social and environmental challenges. ■

Notes

1. "We" is a group of 4 instructors and 5 non-instructor course advisors. The 5 course advisors were based in MSU's Hub for Innovation in Learning and Technology.

2. On the 'thirdspace approach' to learning see Bhabha (1994); hooks (2008); & Soja (1996).

3. For more reading on equity- and justice-centered approaches, see Baker-Bell (2020); Venet (2021).

4. We see the shift in gravity -- the intrinsic pull on students' attention away from grades and toward concern for the larger project -- as related to McCune et al. (2021), concerning teaching in interdisciplinary contexts, and to Goralnik et al. (2015), who address similar ideas in community-based projects.

5. Our conceptions of learning-oriented relationships stem from a body of student development and learning theory, including cognitive development (Josselson, 1996), social responsibility (Sanford, 1967), identity development (Torres, Jones, & Renn 2009), and lifespan development (Kegan, 1994).

6. Some instructors may struggle with adapting teaching behaviors for interdisciplinary content and/or team instruction. Colleges and universities want students to learn in this manner, but departments often do not prepare instructors (or students) or reward these kinds of group teaching efforts (Heinrich et al., 2021). Creating a repeatable process meant we also began to consider ours and our students' disciplinary identities, needs and rewards.

7. Patton et al. (2016) argue that integrated experiences linked through relationships and the individual's identity can lead to learning and growth. See also (Engeström & Sannino, 2012), who understand relation-

ships through process theory, where learning follows information and requires learners to evaluate trusted teachers.

8. On ownership, see Brookhart, Moss and Long (2009) who include ownership as an aspect of learning (p. 52); see also descriptions of self-authorship of learning journeys in Barber, King, and Baxter Magolda (2013).

9. With the term 'de-scripted', we gesture toward the decolonizing theories that have emerged from 'third space' conceptual frameworks, and the unstable sign of deconstruction theory, as defined by Jacques Derrida.

10. Here we are making connections to the shift Django Paris (2012) discusses that we must move from hybridity as a form of inclusion, to approaches that center the sustaining of culture and access to other cultures as an essential orientation of justice focused education.

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