PUTTING THE LOCAL IN GLOBAL EDUCATION

Models for Transformative Learning Through Domestic Off-Campus Programs

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The border between the United States and Mexico spans approximately 2,000 miles from Texas to California and is “the world’s longest contiguous international divide between a superpower and a developing nation” (Romero & LAR, 2008, p. 42). This border has a long history of contested space, cultural shifts, and political and economic forces that inform the disparate and complex realities of both countries and the border region. The signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 ended the Mexican–American War and resulted in the addition of 525,000 square miles of land to the United States. With the Gadsden Purchase, a treaty signed in 1853 between the United States and Mexico, the United States acquired another 29,640 square miles of territory that established the border of New Mexico and Arizona. The eastern border follows the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande River but the western borderline cuts through harsh, remote territory including rugged mountain ranges, the historic lands of the Tohono O’odham, and the binational Sonoran Desert.

At different times a marker of military sovereignty, a site of transborder trade, a home to binational communities, a customs and immigration checkpoint, a divide between political and legal regimes, and even at times a battlefield. What began as a line on a map became a space of evolving and multiple meanings and forms. (St. John, 2012, p. 3)

Today, the U.S.-Mexico border is a complex cultural, linguistic, political, and economic region where people cross the border to work, shop, and socialize. It is an area sometimes referred to as a “denationalized” zone because it extends miles into each country and serves as a cultural buffer area (Griffith, 1993). Norma Cantú (1993) writes of the “pain and joy of the borderlands” where “contradictions abound, cultures clash and meld, and life is lived on the edge.” Today, the region is a tangled web of transnational migration, and border scholar Joseph Nevins (2008) suggests that the boundary is one “between life and death” (p. 169) referring to the access to resources that one has according to his or her country of citizenship.

The twenty-first century is witnessing a dramatic rise in the development and implementation of border enforcement and immigration policies in combination with increased flows of goods and capital. The U.S.-Mexico border is a primary staging ground in which these policies are enacted:

Today there is a pervasive sense of urgency to control the increased flows of people, information, currency and goods that cross borders, despite the difficulty this task entails. This issue has reached a paradoxical state: on one side, there has developed an obsessive necessity to control border flows, while on the other, despite increased security, we are witnessing the highest flows of people and goods across international borders in history. The traditional functions of international borders are being tested by globalization—a phenomenon whose momentum has the potential to severely alter the future state of the world. (Romero & LAR, 2008, p. 15)

The Arizona–Sonora border region has, in particular, become a center of heated debates about immigration and border enforcement policies as the migratory flow from the south has been forced into the dangerous Arizona desert. Millions of crossers have passed through the Tucson sector, and southern Arizona experiences one of the highest numbers of migrant crossings and fatalities along the U.S.-Mexico border (Binational Migration Institute, 2013, p. 11). The magnitude of migration over the past 15 years has contributed to increasing social tension, making the location one of extraordinary significance in national debates on global economic policy, human rights, and national identity.

Lawmakers’ responses to the tensions in the Arizona borderlands have thrust the state into the national spotlight. In 2010 and 2011, Arizona passed a series of highly profiled and controversial laws that target unauthorized
immigrants. Additionally, Arizona has come under scrutiny for its practice of expedited removal proceedings and the widespread use of controversial for-profit private detention facilities. These practices have been carried out in multiple locations across the country since their implementation. Copycat laws have been passed in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Indiana, and Utah, and "fast-track" justice has been implemented in numerous geographic and political contexts across the country.

In contrast to these harsh policies, Arizona has also long been a place of pro-immigrant organizing. Cesar Chavez was born in Arizona and supported the struggles of farmworkers to achieve better working conditions. In the 1980s, the Sanctuary Movement began at Tucson's Southside Presbyterian Church and quickly spread across the country as churches, individuals, and communities offered hospitality and support to Central Americans fleeing the wars in their countries. Later, in response to the many migrants who died crossing the desert, humanitarian groups such as No More Deaths became internationally known for their lifesaving work. Meanwhile, community groups in Arizona such as Puente [Bridge] Movement, Fortín de las Flores [Women's Fort of Flowers], Corazón de [Heart of] Tucson, and numerous others have organized networks to protect immigrants and immigrant communities. Yet, while the sociopolitical tensions in the region are palpable, the borderlands are also home to cross-border cultures bound by history, family, friendship, and solidarity.

The contrasting realities are shaped by the interplay of policy decisions made on local, national, and international levels and thus present a rich location for students to engage global issues through the examination of how they are manifested in a local setting.

**Tucson and the Arizona–Sonora Borderlands as “Place”**

The Earlham College Border Studies Program began in 1997 with support from the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA) in the El Paso/Ciudad Juarez border region. After 10 years, the program moved to Tucson, where it developed a sharp focus on border and immigration policies. The program now offers a fall and spring semester for undergraduate students from colleges and universities across the country. Their academic majors vary widely across the disciplines, including political science, sociology/anthropology, environmental studies, religion, biology, peace and global studies, Latin American studies, American studies, and more. The on-site directors and faculty organize, teach, and lead all aspects of the program in coordination with Earlham College, and faculty from several colleges that send students to

the program form an advisory committee to contribute to ongoing program development.

The educational program is centered on the examination of critical social, economic, and political questions surrounding immigration to the United States and the development of international borders in the twenty-first century. The complexities of migration inform the content and structure of the program, and, as such, the courses and lived experiences enrich one another in an integrated curriculum. The nexus of study, experience, and reflection is foundational to the pedagogy of the program. This framework encourages students to draw informed conclusions about the world around them and to act in thoughtful ways while continually recognizing the impacts these actions have for individuals and communities.

Throughout the semester, students live with families where they experience border realities on a daily basis. The families become important teachers, and students learn how immigration policies directly impact the multiple generations that comprise a household. The home is a learning environment where the student "can personally experience the dynamics of an immigrant family, their history, the close relationships that stretch across the border, and the bi-national culture of the family" (personal communication, Rosalva Fuentes, BSP host mother, December 5, 2013).

Three core courses—Roots and Routes of Migration, Critical Issues in the Borderlands, and Toward Social Change—form the academic heart of the program. Each is designed to inform and complement the experiential aspects of the program by offering historical, contextual, and theoretical study of the issues and region. Discussions include analysis of the readings and reflections on the lived experiences of the students. This combination creates an intense experience that gives students a comprehensive understanding of and personal connection to the people, places, and issues in the region.

The program design falls clearly within the field of experiential education, which is defined here by the Association for Experiential Education:

Experiential education is a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities. (n.d.)

The Border Studies program is grounded, more specifically, in the type of experiential education that Jay Roberts calls "Experience and the Political" to "signal the ways in which experience . . . is embedded within the dynamics of power and social justice" (2012, p. 69). The approach of the program is situated in critical pedagogy, based upon Paulo Freire's key works *Education, the*
Practice of Freedom (1967/1976) and Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968/1970). Critical pedagogy leads to “conscientization,” resulting from cycles of focused study, informed action, and critical reflection, which then lead to transformation (Freire, 1968/1970). Amy Hunter defines transformative learning as a process that precipitates a deep and structural shift of perspective in students through new experience. When learners are challenged to reflect critically on disorienting dilemmas in light of personal biases, when they are encouraged to test and validate their thinking in discourse with others, and when they are given the opportunity to integrate their learning into the fabric of their lives through action, the possibility of transformation exists. (2008, p. 100)

Transformation, though, is not the end process but rather a starting point for social action that leads to social change (Hunter, 2008). Glen Kuecker (2013) takes this a step further, suggesting that “predicament thinking” in the messiness of world situations is key for the future:

Contending with the messy world of predicaments—where difficult trade-offs fraught with disturbing moral and ethical challenges displace problems with clear solutions—will define the life-long learning of our students as well as the ways they will create new knowledge in the twenty-first century. Predicament thinking will be at a premium, and liberal education is well suited for this teaching task.

Program Seminar on Migration: The Global Is Local

The Roots and Routes of Migration course challenges students to use a historical and global perspective in relation to immigration from Central America and Mexico to the United States. Readings concentrate on migration history, the global economy, and free trade, and students examine the significance of an increasingly militarized U.S. border with Mexico and the choices and everyday realities for individuals and communities affected by migration.

Embedded in the Roots and Routes course are travel seminars ranging in length from 3 to 20 days that explore the causes and effects of migration. Students interact with communities in Guatemala, southern Mexico, and along the Mexico-U.S. border that are directly impacted by migration. Students have experienced manifestations of the international boundary from the Pacific Ocean to the west and Big Bend National Park to the east. In Guatemala and Mexico, they have engaged with communities that experience high rates of emigration to the United States, causing disruption or transformation in all levels of society. Students have learned about the hazards of crossing the southern border of Mexico and the trains that carry migrants north, have spent nights with migrants in shelters, and have had discussions with indigenous groups and organizations who are developing alternative practices to function in the twenty-first century.

Through these intentional interactions, students acquire a depth of insight and diversity of perspectives on the debates that surround immigration and border policies. As one student commented, the course syllabus “came alive” in an excursion to Nogales, Sonora. This interplay allows students to apply theory to experience and experience to theory, thereby enriching the learning experiences in each setting. Students gain a deeper connection to and understanding of what borders and migration mean for sending communities, receiving communities, and families caught in both. The following statement by student Keiler B. describes how his interactions deepened his learning experience:

I was able to see first-hand what we had been discussing in our classes in a way that never would have been possible. For me the most powerful part was seeing the communities that migrants had left behind, and understanding not only the forces at work that precipitated their migration, but also the effect their absence has on those left behind. Speaking with migrants in a shelter in Tapachula [Chiapas, the southern Mexican state that borders Guatemala] really hit me hard, because their hopefulness for their journey sometimes stood in stark contrast with the heartbreaking stories describing the route up to the U.S. border I had heard earlier in the semester in a shelter in Altar [Sonora, the northern Mexican state that borders Arizona]. (Whitman College, program participant, 2013)

As Keiler illustrates, this course gives students a holistic and personal encounter with migration as a global and local phenomenon. Students develop an understanding of globalization and its relationship to international migration, but they also take with them the numerous personal experiences they have had.

Critical Issues in the Borderlands: Community as Classroom

In the Critical Issues in the Borderlands course, individuals in the Tucson region act as the students' primary teachers, thereby eliminating the separation between the traditional classroom and the community. Notions of where, how, and with whom education occurs are broadened by expanding
the concept of teachers to include community members who offer multiple perspectives. With the community as text, students reflect critically on these interactions and personal experiences through readings, discussion, and weekly writing assignments.

This course is particularly powerful for students because literature, analysis, and theory become real through visceral encounters with and reactions to a diversity of places, circumstances, and people. For instance, students read about the migrant journey north, the dangers of crossing in the desert, the growing border enforcement apparatus, and the connections immigrant detention centers have to the for-profit prison industrial complex. Simultaneously, students visit with migrants in a shelter in northern Mexico, tour the Border Patrol facility and walk along the towering border wall, hike migrant trails and leave lifesaving water in the desert, witness detained migrants in court as they are processed and sentenced to deportation or incarceration, and tour Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers in the prison town of Florence, Arizona. Occasionally students meet a migrant in a shelter in Mexico and then see that person shackled before a judge in federal court in Tucson. Students thus incorporate powerful experiences into their developing understanding of migration and enforcement policies.

The Field Study

The field study provides an essential learning space for students to participate on an individual basis in an organization or agency that works with immigrant groups. Students devote approximately 12 hours a week at their site to learn from seasoned practitioners and activists. Organizations like No More Deaths and Coalición de Derechos Humanos [Human Rights Coalition] strive to end border suffering and to bring dignity to immigrant communities. At these sites, students contribute to abuse documentation and participate in the desert aid camps. Fortín de las Flores promotes the rights of women and offers leadership training and community building. It also aids women with practical needs through its secondhand clothing store that provides appropriate clothes for job interviews. Students participating here have assisted in various aspects of supporting these women. In the Ecological Program at Manzo Elementary School in Barrio Hollywood, students learn from teachers and youth in project-based learning programs. The school has developed a garden, a greenhouse, and an animal habitat that youth care for as part of their school activities. Moses Thompson, the school counselor at Manzo Elementary and the supervisor of the Border Studies program's students who are placed there, framed the relationship in the following way:

The partnership between the Border Studies program and Manzo Elementary School is a perfect example of place-based learning. Border Studies students gain valuable work experience while immersed in the rich culture and heritage of Barrio Hollywood and help fill the programmatic gaps of an underfunded public school. (personal communication, February 6, 2014)

Throughout the semester the field studies instructor and the student have ongoing conversations through meetings and the exchange of detailed field notes, allowing the instructor to push students in their understanding and analysis of border issues. Kaitlin M. wrote about her "new normal" in a blog entry while participating at No More Deaths:

My new normal does not include days off. My new weekends are spent doing desert aid training. It is sharing a meal with Javier who spent the last 24 days traveling from his home in Guatemala riding on top of a train. . . . My new normal is feeling so many emotions at once that I don't even know what I'm feeling anymore. It is desperately longing and needing to talk to a familiar loved one but when I get on the phone you're speechless. I can't relate my experiences, there's just this disconnect because we no longer live in the same world. Well in actuality, the scariest thing is, is that we both still live in the same world, I'm just looking at it from a different angle. It's like those illusions in which you can see two pictures in the same drawing, and although we're looking at the same picture we are seeing two different things. (personal communication, Earlham College, program participant, February 14, 2011)

Kaitlin's statement illustrates a transformative shift in her perspective and demonstrates that students do not necessarily need to travel far to have their knowledge system destabilized. Indeed, the domestic location might be more destabilizing because the shift happens within the home context. The combination of intense ongoing personal encounters, focused analysis of readings, and critical reflection encourages this difficult, but powerful, transformational learning process.

Toward Social Change

The Toward Social Change course challenges students to develop an understanding of what it means to work for social and environmental justice. Students address systems of inequality and work toward defining issues such as solidarity, justice, and liberation. In this course, students must draw from all of the intellectual and personal experiences they have encountered in the program, and "are encouraged to explore the different aspects of power and privilege that adhere to them by virtue of living in the United States"
(Swanger, 2002, p. 4). Questions they address include: What is the significance of committed, thoughtful engagement, and what might this look like in our lives? How can we maintain hope alongside hardship and injustice? How does resistance emerge? How do the things we witness and experience in the borderlands also occur in the places we come from? What roles do we each play in this?

At the end of the semester, students complete an autoethnography that incorporates both theoretical learning and personal growth. They are asked to contemplate a variety of ways to address the problems, messiness, and predicaments they have observed and encountered and, through this, to articulate their own worldviews and their own positions. Reflection in this context is treated as a substantive critical reasoning skill. Inevitably, students reflect on questions of race, class, language, power, privilege, age, gender, and self as they relate to the experiences they have lived throughout the semester. The question of what it means to be human after the dehumanizing experiences they have seen is often at the heart of their discussion. They struggle to negotiate privilege, how to make sense of it, and how to incorporate thoughtfully that privilege into their own lives. Here we can see the "deep and structural shift of perspective in students through new experience" that Hunter (2008, p. 100) describes in transformative learning. Alex C. wrote that it is important for him to

consider my own position and my own privilege as I continue to understand the Borderlands and how I am implicated in and even perpetuate their current state. Further, the problem encountered here is not one that pertains solely to this experience; I expect to encounter it throughout the rest of my life. However, with this problematic in mind, I continue to seek insight into how to better conduct relationships committed to listening, accountability and human flourishing. (Earlham College, program participant, 2014)

Jenny R. wrote about her work at Owl and Panther, an organization that promotes art therapy with refugee youth, commenting on how her experiences might translate into action:

Those moments when I was mostly listening as I watched the kids color furiously or paint meticulously... aren't going to change the world in any big, spectacular way... But I'm thinking now that the idea of putting art supplies and pencils in the hands of refugee children and parents is something radical. The radical world I want to create includes more avenues for beauty and joy in the lives of all people. Owl and Panther has ultimately taught me that radical change does not always mean Big Change—it means being willing to dive into the grey area, sit with discomfort, and to work to make the world a little more beautiful. (Kenyon College, program participant, 2013)

Similarly, Rena B. wrote of the role of building community as a central tenet of justice work, something she observed through her time with UNIDOS (United Non-Discriminatory Individuals Demanding Our Studies), a student-run group that advocates for ethnic student courses in Tucson high schools:

An integral part of my stay in Tucson has been the openness and warmth with which I've been welcomed by UNIDOS and other people in the activist community... Before this program, the idea of graduating terrified me. Now I feel more excited, more hopeful about the world beyond college, the ability of people and communities to live intentionally, take care of themselves and each other and strive together for a better life for everyone. (Oberlin College, program participant, 2013)

Conclusion: Education for the Twenty-First Century

Tucson and the greater borderlands are an exceptional setting for the cross-cultural and transformative learning expected from off-campus study programs. The Border Studies program places students in situations where they face and grapple with complicated twenty-first-century predicaments in the "messy" context of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Oberlin College professor of history Steven Volk describes how this affects students upon return to campus:

What happens on the Border Studies program is that students are able to integrate a number of approaches, from sustainability and environmental studies to law, immigration, history, health care, and many more, around a specific geography and a specific set of burning issues... They come back not just energized and motivated, but better able to take command over their own education. (personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Reece Jones contextualizes the nature of the dilemmas posed by contemporary border walls by noting that an era marked by globalization, interconnectedness, and expectations of "an increasingly borderless world" has ironically been an era of record-setting levels of border militarization and wall construction between so-called first- and third-world nations (2012,
The ethical questions regarding the construction of walls intensify when we consider the extreme levels of global inequality contributing to mass migration. The states that build walls argue that they are necessary for the security of those within, while others describe this predication as the "age of global apartheid," a clear condemnation of border restrictions (Nevins, 2008). Such a predicament compels students to ask: What is the future of national boundaries and how will that affect the people and environments of the borderlands and beyond? What is the future of human mobility in the globalized free markets of the twenty-first century? How am I implicated in these questions and what role can I play in addressing them?

Through their participation with the Border Studies program, students tackle such questions and apply what they learn through the realities of migration and borders to a wide range of social, economic, environmental, and political dilemmas that they will encounter throughout their lives. The program prepares participants to actively work and to shape the world around them in ways that reflect their values and principles.

References


