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Cover Page Footnote

This paper will serve as the final reflection of an experiential learning project through the International Studies Senior Seminar. Working with US Together, a refugee resettlement agency in Toledo, has so far been an extremely rewarding experience, and has challenged the author to consider more deeply the process of obtaining cross-cultural competence, how to maintain the dignity of the population one is working with, and the skills needed to find and earn funding for non-profits. The project is ongoing, but the paper may be expected to provide an overview of the work with US Together and interactions with its clients, as well as a connection to the class theme of cosmopolitanism. By approaching problems from an interdisciplinary angle, it is much easier to understand different viewpoints and possible solutions. Other considerations will include the benefits of interacting in the world as a “global citizen”, how to approach experiential learning with the right intentions, and how cultural assumptions and politics combine to enable systems that benefit some over others. This paper will provide a culmination of study in International Studies, drawing in multiple disciplines to structure the reflection.

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Cosmopolitanism & Dignity: Reflection on Experiential Learning with US Together – Toledo

Abstract

This paper will serve as the final reflection of an experiential learning project through the International Studies Senior Seminar. Working with US Together, a refugee resettlement agency in Toledo, has been an extremely rewarding experience, and has challenged the author to consider more deeply the process of obtaining cross-cultural competence, how to maintain the dignity of the population one is working with, and the skills needed to find and obtain funding for non-profits. This paper may be expected to provide an overview of the work with US Together and interactions with its clients, as well as a connection to the class theme of cosmopolitanism. By approaching problems from an interdisciplinary angle, it is much easier to understand different viewpoints and possible solutions. Other considerations will include the benefits of interacting in the world as a “global citizen”, how to approach experiential learning with the right intentions, and how cultural assumptions and politics combine to enable institutional systems that benefit some over others. This paper will provide a culmination of study in International Studies, drawing in multiple disciplines to structure the reflection.

Introduction

Service means different things to different people. For some, it might involve a mission trip to a less developed country, and others, spending days sewing protective masks for friends and neighbors during a global pandemic. Service can encompass a wide variety of thought and action. International service can sometimes end up being even more complex, because tied in with a desire to make a difference is a web of perceptions on the part of all involved. Our ability to work with different populations is influenced by our perceptions, unconscious or not, of race, class, religion, ethnicity, and other social differences. These pre-conceived notions must be noticed and challenged in order to serve in a way that benefits both parties. Service is a two-way street and learning how to go about service with the intention of not just helping or providing aid,

but to consciously work *with* a community, is one of the first lessons we encountered during our work this semester.

Experiential learning has emerged as a highly valuable method of teaching and learning that allows students hands-on experience while also connecting those experiences to critical and more abstract-theoretical issues and discussions. This semester, our class worked with the community of refugees and immigrants (from here on out referred to as New Americans) that is served by US Together (UST), a refugee and immigrant services agency with offices in Columbus, Cleveland, and Toledo. UST was founded in 2003 in response to the growing needs of refugees and immigrants in Ohio. US Together is a mutual assistance agency, which means it was started by, and is still run by, former refugees.

To fulfill the requirements for our class, my classmates and I met with US Together – Toledo’s Women’s Empowerment Group and conducted introductory research into early childhood education to prepare a grant proposal that would fund the creation of an early childhood education program. This project marks my third time working with US Together throughout my undergraduate career. The first was a project through a BGSU course on International Service-Learning in the Spring of 2017. Last summer, I interned with UST’s Cleveland branch in their Reception & Placement field. This reflection, while focused on the work of this semester, will inevitably draw from these past experiences.

It might be helpful to provide a breakdown of our work throughout the semester. As a class, we began by focusing on the topic of cosmopolitanism, to form a theoretical-conceptual basis on which we could contextualize the rest of our experiences. We started some initial research into the topic of early childhood education so we could better understand what we would be asking for in our grant proposal. We established contact with a representative from the

US Together office in Toledo, and eventually directly with the community itself, through a meeting with the Women's Empowerment Group. From there we were able to focus our research on the aspects specified to us by the members of the community. We began brainstorming ideas for the grant proposal itself, eventually choosing to divide up the sections in order to craft a cohesive document. Once minor edits have been addressed, the proposal will be sent formally to our community partner for submission. Many concepts from our class readings have helped to shape our methods and thinking for this project.

Applying Foundational Concepts to Experiential Learning

Cosmopolitanism has been the overarching theme of our International Studies Senior Seminar this semester. Not only has this multi-dimensional concept been the subject of intense academic discourse and research, but some aspects related to the academic discourse can also be teased out to help in work with a community partner. Cosmopolitanism overwhelmingly deals with how we interact with other people in the world, and despite the fact that individuals are citizens of specific countries, they are nevertheless a part of a larger global society. Two concepts explored in our class are particularly helpful when considering our experiential project. First, cosmopolitanism, as described in William Smith's introduction, is concerned with the nature of humanity that all people share as forming the basis of a global community (Smith 1-2). Local communities and identities are not minimized, but membership in global society comes with certain obligations towards one another. Second is the Stoics' concept of concentric circles. If you are the dot in the middle of the circles, expanding out from you would be circles representing your friends and family, your community, your country, and eventually, all people in the world, or mankind as whole (Smith 3-4). It is normal and expected for a person to have stronger ties with the people they know and are familiar with, but this should not stop them from

acknowledging their being part of a larger global human community (Smith 4). The question here then, is how to expand these circles and weight them equally, and in doing so, reconcile one's local and global attachments.

The quest for a cosmopolitan identity and the development of cultural competence are interconnected ideas. A helpful diagram to consider is Mitch Hammer's Intercultural Development Continuum. The path to cultural competence can be laid out in a sequence or pathway. The "minimization" phase is considered the halfway point on the continuum. Though there is an awareness of cultural differences, they are downplayed in favor of emphasizing humanity's similarities. As a result, the experiences that are informed by socio-economic, racial or cultural differences are minimized. The difference between this label and those higher on the spectrum ("Acceptance" and "Adaptation") is *awareness*. In the final two stages of developing an intercultural mindset, one is able to recognize the different contexts of different cultures and accept them as how the world operates. People may be fundamentally equal, but that does not mean they all have to be the same. Having a clear understanding of another culture and incorporating different cultural perspectives into one's work is a mark of the intercultural mindset. Examining one's own culture as well as others constructively and realistically sets apart the interculturally minded from those with a monocultural mindset. I found it difficult to analyze my own behavior in the context of this framework, and still find it hard to put myself in any one category, but I do feel I have grown over the course of this project in my ability to recognize my part in this global web of interactions and use that to consider how to interact with both my classmates and our community partner.

A Ted Talk by Ernesto Sirolli titled "Want to help someone? Shut up and listen!" provides a good basis for how Americans or those from other highly developed Western

countries should consider foreign aid projects: “If people don’t want to be helped, leave them alone! This should be the first principle of aid” (Sirolli 04:52-05:14). His ideas are helpful for looking at one’s own actions and how they might be perceived by the community one is working with. To begin, Sirolli notes that you should never arrive in a community with any ideas you might want to implement. Essentially, you should not be projecting what you *think* a community needs before conferring with them (Sirolli 06:00-06:27). There is no room for one’s ego here; you can absolutely have ideas of how to proceed before meeting with the community, but they should not be so set in stone that you cannot divert your attention to factors or issues that actually concern the community. Having watched this talk before our first meeting with US Together’s Women’s Empowerment Group, I felt prepared to “shut up and listen”, so to speak. While we had a baseline understanding of what our project would entail, it was still necessary to hear directly from the community we would be partnering with.

Another point Sirolli emphasizes when working with a community is to “[work] with the local passion” (Sirolli 05:29-05:56). This of course ties in with listening to what the community wants, rather than imposing your own ideas, but it also connects back to this idea of service as a two-way street. The work should be done in a way in which both sides get the most out of the experience. It is not selfish to hope to gain something from a service experience, as long as the experience is the result of a collaborative partnership rather than a one-sided attempt at help. This is the way to make lasting connections with the communities you work with, as well as to help shake off any patronizing or paternalistic perceptions that might be present in the initial interactions or one’s pre-conceived notions of the project’s goals or its practical implementation.

The consequences of ignoring the wishes of the community can be harmful, especially if tactics and methods are imposed on a community that normally uses other means. The 2014

Sochi Winter Olympic games provides a case study of the effects of large-scale international protests against the draconian anti-LGBTQ+ laws enacted by Vladimir Putin (Davidson & McDonald 64-65). The trumpeted calls to boycott the games in support of Russia's sexual minorities, while aimed at supporting the realization of human rights (a very cosmopolitan ideal), fell short of directly helping individuals in the Russian LGBTQ+ community by applying methods and techniques that were inadequate for the specific cultural and political context. The protests showed the downside of approaching human rights through a strictly Western lens. The authors criticize Western human rights discourses, which do little to actually aid local marginalized communities (Davidson & McDonald 66, 70). They are described as performative, imposing grandiose methods of protest that goes against the work of activists within Russia, who have historically chosen a grassroots campaign for equality, thereby changing minds one by one (Davidson & McDonald 73). This provides a good example of the negative effects (albeit on a much larger scale than our project) of neglecting to consult the community involved. Indeed, here, well-meaning activists were actually working *for* the community, when they should have been working *with* the community. It is thought that the highly publicized Olympic protests have actually helped Putin by strengthening his presentation of sexual minorities as a symptom of Western decay (Davidson & McDonald 71). Such protests by foreigners, particularly western ones, may only provide more instances for Putin to push an "us vs. them" narrative and appeal to the "traditional values" of the populace, thus further normalizing his discriminatory policies.

Experiential learning, community-based learning, service-learning, whichever term one prefers, provides a different set of skills and experiences than a traditional research-based class. It allows students to develop in different ways, encouraging them to apply their abstract-conceptual learning to real-life problems. International Studies, as a multidisciplinary program,

prepares students to think about issues from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, thereby expanding the toolbox of methods and techniques students have at their practical disposal. Service-learning allows students to develop their civic capacity, their ability to apply their intellect, knowledge and experience to find solutions to community challenges (Cress et al. 14-16) This not only benefits those of us who have hopes of careers in the non-profit sector, but all students who will end up being part of a larger community. It allows students to recognize their place in a community web of interactions and working with international populations in particular helps students envision themselves within a global community without necessarily having to leave the country.

Practical Issues & Challenges: The Importance of Adaptability

This past summer I served as a Reception & Placement intern with US Together – Cleveland. The Cleveland branch provides services to refugees immediately upon arrival to the United States, as opposed to Toledo, which works with New Americans who have been in the country for longer periods of time. I worked closely with one of UST's case managers to handle pre-arrival paperwork (including registration for social security and welfare), acquiring housing and living necessities, and helping to introduce arrivals to their new communities. This work pushed me well beyond my comfort zone. I had to learn how to navigate the health-care system when taking clients to medical appointments, maintain an appropriate level of confidentiality, and ensure that time-sensitive documents were submitted on time. The clear necessity and urgency of the work placed more pressure on me but knowing the level of need involved pushed me to get things done. Both with this experience and prior experiences through my introduction to service-learning coursework, I greatly developed my ability to communicate cross-culturally. A language barrier can oftentimes be a source of anxiety when working with international

communities, and I have at times worried about behaving awkwardly. However, my experiences have allowed me to grow my cross-cultural communication skills both in regard to working with interpreters and using more physical cues in order to communicate. This vastly increased my confidence in working with international communities, as well as in general public speaking.

Our work this semester also pushed me. I had attended grant-writing workshops in the past, but had never written a proposal before, so I was excited to learn a skill that would be directly tied to the non-profit work I would like to do in the future. Because it felt like something directly tied to my future, I think I put more pressure on myself to perform well. I tend to want to do a whole project by myself, so this has been a good opportunity for me to work with my classmates and share ideas, so our proposal did not come out disjointed. A lot of outside communication was necessary to help us determine the best way to tackle the project. Though as International Studies majors, we might like to think ourselves faultless in our intercultural communication, there is still room to analyze our work and recognize assumptions we had been working with that might truly be limiting. At the beginning of the semester, before we had met with the Women's Empowerment Group, we began research with the intent on providing a presentation on intergenerational and intercultural understanding in the United States. While we went in assuming our audience would have recently arrived in the U.S., we soon learned that due to recent cutbacks by President Trump, UST – Toledo had not been receiving very many new arrivals, and in fact most of its clients had been in the U.S. for months and years. In light of this information, it felt like lecturing women, many of whom were mothers, about how to treat their children could possibly come across as condescending. Instead, we went into our first meeting, as described below, with a much more laidback, adaptable plan in mind.

We were able to meet once directly with the community US Together serves, in the form of the Women’s Empowerment Group, a safe space for New American women of all ages to meet, socialize, and discuss challenges they might be facing. It was important for us to build initial trust with the community, and we did not want our presence to be imposing. It is important to be adaptable and able to read the room when working with communities with backgrounds different from one’s own. One factor we neglected to consider was whether the presence of our male classmates at the meeting would feel constraining to the women present, as many came from male-dominated cultures. We were able to adapt and have our male classmates work with the children in a separate room so the women would feel able to speak freely. These aspects were able to challenge our cultural sensitivity and guide us in making the most appropriate change. As we discussed ideas for the early childhood education program and the future of the Women’s Empowerment Group with the women present, we ran into another challenge. We wanted to be able to implement things that the group told us they wanted, but we also had to be realistic about what we could provide in the time frame we had. Trying to put together a project that is beyond us would only negatively affect both parties if we were unable to follow through.

Some of the ideas expressed to us became the basis of the proposed early childhood education program. The desire for children to gain independence was noted, as well as the hope that the sessions would be more activity- than lecture-based. In the eyes of the parents, they wanted a program that would truly benefit their children’s development and make it worth the commute. From these requests, we narrowed the focus of our research into “play-based” or “activity-based” learning as a way to develop foundational skills that would help children’s capabilities once they entered school. Initially, in addition to the grant for the education program, we were also going to lead a session on whatever the women felt they wanted to get out of the

program. Issues such as transportation, computer literacy, professional development and obtaining licenses to sell home-cooking were all challenges or desires that were put forward. From that, we had to determine what we could realistically do, and which aspects may be more reasonable for other groups to handle.

Due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on universities, BGSU switched to all online classes in the latter half of the semester. This proved a challenge for a class like ours that was based primarily on the face-to-face, inter-personal interaction between us and our community partner. For many of us, this transition dampened our productivity, and the class had to shift focus to determine what could still be done. There were initial plans for a second meeting with the Women's Empowerment Group and to follow through on some of their requests, including facilitating a workshop on professional development. These plans obviously had to change once social distancing became the norm, and we moved all of our attention over to the grant proposal.

Conclusion

Throughout my experiences working with different immigrant and refugee communities, one concept keeps popping up, namely the idea of dignity. There are many definitions of dignity, but the one that has stuck with me the most is the idea of recognizing the humanity in other people and respecting it in interactions with them. This is an important requirement of working with a community partner and something I recognized during my internship with UST – Cleveland. When working with marginalized communities, it is easy to fall into a mindset in which one's good-natured desire to help unintentionally lowers the partner to below the level of the "helper". This might go hand and hand with the assumption that one has all the answers and knows exactly what the community needs. At this point, only the dignity of the helper is being

maintained. It takes constant self-challenging and reflection on one's behavior to recognize these limiting thoughts, and to push oneself to work past them. Listening to what the community one is working with wants is one way to respect the dignity of the people one is working with. In September of 2019, I was lucky enough to attend a lecture at BGSU by Dr. Donna Hicks, a Harvard professor who has worked extensively on solving world conflicts through her Dignity Model. Her definition of dignity is "inherent value and vulnerability". Essentially, every person has the same equal value, and the vulnerability is the fear we experience as our value is hurt or questioned. Refugees and immigrants have been vilified in the media in recent years, which can be interpreted as an attack on their dignity. The institutions of the United States exist in such a way as to greatly benefit some and sorely disadvantage others, so in working with marginalized communities, the recognition and maintenance of dignity should be a priority.

Connecting our class readings with our experiential learning has allowed me to better reflect and think critically about how to effectively work with international communities. Ernesto Sirolli's Ted Talk provided an excellent basis for our meeting with the community partner. We made conscious efforts not to impose our own egos and use the suggestions of the Women's Empowerment Group as the basis for our grant proposal. In learning the grant-writing process, it became apparent that showing what need was going to be met was crucial. To effectively articulate this, it was necessary for us to establish some trust with our community partner, and I believe we handled the meeting in a way that allowed us to do that. If cosmopolitanism is concerned with the interactions between different groups, while expanding our awareness of being part of a world community, working with people who have been displaced should count as one of the duties prescribed to us. It is that interaction that starts to expand the concentric circles theorized by the Stoics. Working in partnership with those different than oneself slowly expands

those connections and can even help one connect more deeply with their own culture and background.

This project has allowed me to grow professionally, as I look forward to further study and work in the non-profit sector, as well as provided the opportunity to critically consider my growth in the area of cultural competency. I have gained practical skills in cultural competency, adaptability, and critical reflection. All of my work with US Together has helped me recognize a need in my community and others and pushed me to consider how I can help meet that need and solve those problems. I hope I can use the experiences of this class and all my time in the International Studies program to advocate for those marginalized by this country's institutions and policies and maintain the dignity of myself and others in doing so.

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