

# Helping Students Learn Beyond the Bounds of Their Imagination: Lessons from a Global Citizenship Practicum<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The author revisits a global citizenship practicum he co-facilitated in 2003. His interviews with former participants show differences in what he and his teaching colleague remember and what students remember, revealing three critical teaching functions for facilitators of global citizenship practicums: fostering autonomy and independence, encouraging critical engagement, and being trusted elders. Implications for student learning and teaching practice extend to any situation where teachers want to cultivate a sense agency, independence, and critical outlook; for when teachers want students to learn beyond the bounds of their imagination.

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In the spring of 2003, a colleague and I at *The Collegiate at the University of Winnipeg* in Winnipeg, Canada took thirteen high school students on a trip to Costa Rica. It was a part of an eight-month global citizenship course<sup>2</sup>, which culminated in living and working for two weeks the village of Pedrogoso, Costa Rica. Eight and a half years later, as part of a Ph.D. research project, I re-visited the experience with many of the participants, curious to know what they remembered of that time and what sense they made of that experience these many years later. I was interested in whether or how the practicum had accomplished what it had set out to do – cultivating qualities of global citizenship<sup>3</sup>, and if those effects were lasting<sup>4</sup>. The revisit included recorded interviews with eleven of the fourteen participants in the summer of 2011 (including with my colleague and co-facilitator).

As can be imagined, what participants remembered, how they perceived it and related it to their lives, differed in perspective and consequence and with varying degrees of intensity and complexity. Each individual brought a distinct perspective, insight, and set of memories to the interview. However, as the summer of interviews unfolded and the transcriptions began to pile up, and in the midst all of the different responses to the questions and queries, several themes began to emerge. Not surprisingly, one of the themes was change and transformation. For many participants, Costa Rica 2003 represented an experience that transformed their perspective on the world and their relationship to global ‘others’ and generated an expanded sense of agency and hopeful possibility (Kornelsen, 2013).

Interestingly however, there were several significant differences between what my teaching colleague and I remembered and how we interpreted the experience and what the students recalled and how they understood the experience. These differences pointed to several roles she and I played, often unwittingly, as facilitators of the practicum, that were important to cultivating perspectives of global citizenship. And it is with this that this article is concerned. Through examining the different lenses students and teachers brought to the revisit, three critical teaching roles for facilitators of high school global citizenship practicums are revealed.

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## Who remembered what

I begin with the memories of pre and post trip activities. Even though, the focus of the interviews was on the two-week experience in Costa Rica, in most instances at some point in the conversation I would ask about the pre- and

post- trip classes, preparations and debrief sessions, seeking impressions on how those sessions might have shaped/ influenced/ informed the Costa Rica experience. This is some of what I was told:

(All names are pseudonyms)

“To be honest. . . nothing sticks out for what we did in preparation. Obviously we talked about the cultural differences and that sort of thing. I can’t remember anything profound off the top of my head, but, it was obviously important to go through, important to look over before going.” (Maya)

“Just being a little bit scared that is what I remember [about the pre-trip sessions].

[The debrief sessions] were fun. I don’t really remember what we talked about; but I know that it was great to see everyone.” (Lily)

“To be honest, I don’t remember much about the preparations or debrief at all. I remember that we had prep sessions, and we were encouraged to work on our Spanish. I don’t remember the debrief at all! I’m sorry. Don’t take it personally.” (Nell)

In sum, most participants’ memories of pre- and post- classes were either non-existent or limited to mostly emotional recollections. What about Adrienne, my colleague and co-facilitator? Early in our conversation she said this:

So that was eight years ago. There have been five trips to Costa Rica from the *Collegiate* since then. I’ve been the recipient of these students, these later students, and their reactions when they come back, and I realize to what extent preparation is everything.

And I agree. And so does the scholarly literature (see below). And this raises the obvious question, if Adrienne and I believed that preparation was ‘everything’, why was so little of it remembered by students?

### **An observation**

A partial answer may lay in the responses to another question: What advice would you give prospective participants. Other than to “do it” (on which there was unanimity), the most common and oft-repeated response was to go with an open mind, and to have few expectations. This was conveyed in different ways; the following provides a sense of participants’ nuanced and textured perspective.

“Try to keep your mouth shut, and listen to what they have to say. And try not to judge when you see something that’s different from how we

do things back home. See the person; see the people. Because the things that you’re going to learn are not what you expect. It’s going to be completely different.” (Lily)

“I think it all comes down to telling them to just be open and lose their expectations and to accept good and bad.” (Emma)

“I guess I would tell them to just really enjoy it. It’s such a great experience and opportunity that it is really important to go with an open mind and be really adaptable.” (Nell)

“Well I would definitely say to them that if they are going to take an experience, they should take it with the most complete open mind that they possibly can. Just try to immerse their Self in the situation, the families, the communities.” (Matt)

The advice of program participants was direct and unequivocal: Keep your mouth shut and listen; See the people; What you’re going to learn is not what you’ll expect; Lose your expectations; Go with an open mind and be adaptable; Take the experience with the most open mind possible; Leave everything at home; Stop thinking and start feeling. Never follow the line.

And the program facilitators, did they concur? Yes. Adrienne believed this to be the hallmark of our program, and critical to its success. This is what she said at the start:

We went there like a virgin group . . . We had no specific expectations. So we went there really open to everything, and we weren’t hoping for anything specific . . . But our kids came back feeling like they’d made a difference; and feeling like it had been a life-changing experience.

And this was her advice to other groups / teachers:

You have to teach them as we did, unknowingly, in our blissful ignorance, we just said, “Have no expectations.” But I think that is still the best piece of advice: to go there knowing that, anything can happen, and not to think, not have preconceived notions about these people . . . So that’s the message I think you have to give the kids, is just go with an open mind.

I agree with Adrienne, with the gist of everything she says. I remember being very concerned about the dangers of ill-informed and preconceived notions shaping students' experience, preventing them from seeing and learning, confirming ill-founded and prejudicial or patronizing attitudes. And so unlike the course theory, preparation and post trip debrief sessions, teachers and students, all concurred on this, and deriving a similar conclusion: The most important thing in approaching experiences like Costa Rica is openness (both as noun and verb; to open and be open), not to have expectations.

Something else: I don't remember telling or teaching students not to have expectations. And as Adrienne noted above, if we did, 'we taught them unknowingly, in our blissful ignorance.' However Jayne remembers that we did:

It was probably everything beyond anybody's expectations of what it would be because you said from the get-go not to have expectations. You didn't want us to see pictures. There was a big emphasis on keeping expectations to a minimum about what we were doing. We were all kind of like nobody knew what to expect.

It appears as though our private anxieties were felt by others. I may not remember telling students not to have expectations, but I do remember being worried that students would be disappointed with the experience. And given the circumstances of the program – this was a first for everyone – no one really knew what to expect – students or teachers, perhaps as Adrienne suggests unbeknownst to ourselves, she and I inevitably and openly conveyed our concerns, worries, states of mind about expectations and openness.

To summarize: the in-class preparation was mostly not remembered, and what everyone agreed was most critical was transmitted mostly out of happenstance, and without much conscious intent.

### **Another observation**

Lily reminded me of something else about which I had not given thought:

The fact that we had your trust, that was huge too. That was really important, and it also I

think made us more confident in how we interacted with people. Because by you trusting us made us feel like, "Ok, yeah. I'm trustworthy."

Jayne saw something similar, and analyzes why:

Adrienne and you treated us like we were one of you when we were there. I'll never forget when we went and stopped at Adrienne's house, me and Lily did. And she talked to us like she was a student with us. She shared some experiences . . . there was something about that that was distinct because everything was new to everyone, everybody involved. So much of the experience was seeing our teachers in the same place as we are.

What Jayne and Lily describe here – being trusted, being seen and treated as fellows – is not something to which I had given much thought – before, during, or after Costa Rica. Perhaps it is, as Jayne suggests, derivative of the fact that we were all equals, by virtue of the experience being a significant first for us all, along with the requisite fears, novelties and sharings. We were all in this together. And this, eight years later is remembered by participants as having enriched the experience – being trusted, and having teachers relate to them as equals. What Jayne means with 'so much of the experience' is not clear; but I wonder whether it (being free and trusted) allowed for fuller participation, or as Adrienne alludes to below, greater 'sentience'.

And finally, when I asked Adrienne whether we had accomplished our goals in Costa Rica, she said,

I feel pretty confident that we did. I went with no expectation in terms of the kids, how much they would actually glean from this experience. In our debrief after I was amazed at what came out, stuff that I hadn't noticed or picked up on. They're very feeling sentient little beings, and they picked up a lot of interesting things.

This is as I witnessed, and as I understood it. I too was amazed at what 'came out.' And like Adrienne, I went with few expectations about what the students would take from the experience. This is not to say we did not have hope or intention, and saw great learning potential in the experience, but whether it would

happen, and specifically how, we did not know. When the time came, during the Costa Rica trip itself, we were mostly pre-occupied with keeping the kids safe and alive. But when it was over and when we came back, we discovered the kids had learned things in ways, and at depths, we had not expected.

## Summary

At surface, then, some unsettling conclusions might be drawn from the disparate and various accounts above. Most of the time spent in the classroom before or after the trip seemed of little learning consequence to the students, at least if memory serves an accurate gauge – this in spite of the substantial time and effort expended by everyone, and by the fact that the teachers thought these preparations to be of invaluable importance. The part of the preparation that was universally acknowledged, by students and teachers, to be of critical importance – to be open and travel with few expectations – apparently was conveyed mostly by happenstance, and not by design. Finally, as Jayne alludes, and as I heard from several other participants, teachers were at their teaching best when they weren't teachers at all, but 'one of us'. Indeed, in the end, both Adrienne and I were surprised at how much students had learned and taken from the experience, understanding that it might have been in spite of us, and certainly because of students' own sentient independence.

What does this mean for facilitators of global citizenship practicums, and what are the pedagogical implications? An examination of literature inspired by education theorists like John Dewey and Paulo Friere, and a re-examination of the memories and meanings of practicum participants offer insight and illumination.

## Teaching roles

Even though students expressed appreciation for their teachers, they said or remembered little about the formal pedagogic role they played in the practicum. In many ways this ambivalence is reflected in the scholarly literature. George Walker (2006), as head of the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), one of the most prestigious posts in international education, in his book *Educating the Global Citizen* says this:

The success of every educational endeavour depends upon a teacher . . . School buildings are important, the number of books in the library matter, the IB programmes are the gateway to an enlightened education, but without the right teachers the whole lot come crashing down (p. 45)

But after this singular endorsement of teachers, Walker offers little in clear answers about what teachers do or could do to 'keep the whole lot from crashing down'. He is not alone. The silence on the teacher's role in 'teaching' has a long history, from Socrates' assertion that teaching anything is impossible (since all learning is re-collection) to Heidegger's (1968) contention that teachers should just let learners learn, to Rogers' (1969) claim that teachers don't teach learners anything and are at their best when they don't interfere. Even Dewey (1916), who argued that teachers play an indispensable role in facilitating learning, says that "we can never teach directly, but indirectly by means of the environment (p.17); (and what) conscious deliberate teaching can do is at most to free capacities (already) formed for fuller exercise"(p.19). This teaching silence is implied in the remembrances recounted above.

And yet, Todd (2003), says, "teachers, as the vehicles through which the pedagogical demand for learning to become is made real for students, cannot escape their role' (31), nor argue others (Jarvis, 1995; Van Manen, 1990, 2000), their responsibility. I agree. That the CR '03<sup>5</sup> teachers felt responsible, for doing the right thing, pedagogically and otherwise was an abiding and foremost concern. Here is Adrienne:

I was very aware of these 13 young people I was responsible for. And so I remember getting on the bus in the morning and I could feel already even before anybody spoke, I could feel almost which way the day was going to go . . . So it was that awareness always. I mean it was a huge responsibility for me, and I don't think I realized till I got there just how big this was . . . So that's probably my strongest impression, still today.

And mine. I remember sleeping only three or four hours a night, worried about the well-being – physical, emotional, educational – of those thirteen young people. And what animated

Adrienne's and my discussion more than any other – before, during and after CR– was the issue of when to intervene and when to let be, for the sake of those frames of well-being. All of this is to suggest that Adrienne and I must have believed that we were playing a necessary and pivotal role. But what was it exactly? It turns out on closer examination of what participants said and did not say, teacher-facilitators of global citizenship practicums, wittingly or not, perform three critical functions. And none of them have anything to do with making pedantic entreaties about global citizenship.

### **Being a trusted elder**

First, beyond the most obvious, keeping the students alive and healthy, it is being a person who inspires involvement and participation in a global citizenship practicum in the first place. As Phillips (1998 in Todd, 2003) says, it is being an elder whose judgment can be trusted – trusted for a particular experience's significance.

Not discounting circumstance, personal predisposition or familial proclivities to engage in international life-altering activities, when participants were asked what or who had been the greatest determinant in their decision to sign up for the Costa Rica practicum, seven named a parent; six identified a teacher/s. Jacob echoed what half the group said: "I knew this was something that you (and Adrienne) were interested in . . . so I knew that it would be something I would be interested in [too]." In short, the decision to participate in the program in the first place was significantly influenced by trusted adults, a parent or a teacher, or both. This suggests that one of the primary influences of teachers, perhaps their most affecting pedagogy, derives not from delivering course content, or facilitating pre-trip preparations, but from a trusting relationship with students.

### **Encouraging critical engagement**

According to experiential learning pedagogues, critical thinking and reflection are crucial to any effective learning derived from experience. In unambiguous terms, Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) say,

Any educational endeavour, including study abroad that does not structure reflection

and critical analysis of the international experience itself into the curriculum is not engaging in experiential education. (p. 45)

Based on the critical pedagogy and theory of John Dewey and Paulo Friere, the biggest challenge for global citizenship practicums, and hence an essential responsibility of its facilitators is cultivating critical engagement – combating thoughtless and unreflective experience, and addressing issues of power and privilege (Kornelsen, 2013). To this end, practitioners call for pre and post trip critical reflection in study abroad or international service programs (Grusky, S. 2000; Malewesky & Phillion, 2009; Sichel, B. 2006; Willard-Holt, 2000). For as Fred Dallmayr (2007) concludes in writing about creating a world governed by cosmopolitan ideals, it is best to create spaces for people and cultures to learn about each and from each other as equal participants.

What happened in Costa Rica? Participants had little memory of participating in formal sessions of critical analysis and reflection such as those recommended by theorists and practitioners. Yet there were many examples where participants responded critically to previously held assumptions and perspectives (e.g. questioning North American ethnocentrism, Western cultural domination (Kornelsen, 2013)). Eight years later, when asked what advice they would give future participants their responses were unequivocal: 'Be open, and keep your ethnocentrism in check'. (See above)

So who or what facilitated these occasions, perspectives or responses of critical insight? A part of it might be accounted for by a critical stance several participants took into the practicum in the first place; a part of it might be attributed to a growing awareness in the intervening eight years, as implied by Sara's observation "As in any encounter (I realize now) it's not about the trip itself; it's about the lens you chose to understand it through, and how you factor it into your life, how you position yourself." And a part of it may have been due to the incessant worry Adrienne and I had about students making pre-mature and ill-informed judgments of people and situations. Even though eight years later, she and I had little memory of making open and formal appeals to think

critically – as Adrienne admitted, “Unknowingly, in our blissful ignorance, we just said, ‘have no expectations’.”<sup>6</sup> Apparently our private anxieties became public.

(I remember) how we had been prepared that we were supposed to be very open to the places that we were going, and the cultural differences. There was always a big emphasis put on . . . you’re going into a different culture.’ (Jayne)

### **Fostering autonomy and independence**

Dallymar (2007) says that for students to learn to be cosmopolitan, they must be respected for their autonomous capacities to learn and discover. The truth of that statement was demonstrated in our post-trip debrief sessions. To re-quote Adrienne:

I went with no expectation in terms of the kids, how much they would actually glean from this experience . . . In our debrief after, I was amazed at what came out, stuff that I hadn’t noticed or picked up on: They’re very feeling sentient little beings, and they picked up a lot of interesting things.

These were things that neither she nor I necessarily anticipated or predicted; these learnings emerged from students’ autonomous selves, and without any conscious pedantry on our part. Dewey (1997) says that

perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes of likes and dislikes, maybe and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned. But these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future. (p. 48)

The most important things students learn in school, Dewey (1997) claims, are not the content of the formal curriculum per se, but are collateral, such as attitudes that affect one’s bearing in the world and one’s disposition to future learning and growth. This is not unlike Adrienne’s observation that what students ‘picked up’, independently of us was of critical importance, and not necessarily part of the intended formal curriculum. It is with this in

mind that Dewey (1997) says freedom is a critical pre-requisite for students to get to know themselves and their relationship to the world.

What Dewey, Dallymar and Adrienne suggest is that students’ most important learning is self-discovered, happens autonomously, and often in the cracks of the formal curriculum. But are they saying by this to just let students be, let them find themselves and their own way in the world, and they will grow into paragons of cosmopolitan virtue? No, says Dewey (1916); while we may never educate directly, we do so indirectly by means of the environment, and “whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference” (p.18). Teachers play a pivotal role he says in creating circumstances and environments of balance, facilitating experiential continuity through an expanding layering of learning experiences, providing ongoing experiences that learners find challenging but not so challenging or different from each other that there is no continuity between them. The goal is to foster independence and growth of an ever-expanding world.

Finding this balance between challenge and capacity was our constant worry – Adrienne and I – between keeping students safe and challenged within their means, and respecting their freedom and sentient independence – with a view to cultivating independence and growth. How was our concern interpreted and experienced by participants?

Lily and Jayne felt trusted and respected as equals (see above). What is notable in both Jayne’s and Lily’s responses is the impact of a teacher’s ‘nod.’ In this case, our orientation of trust and equality was remembered vividly eight years later and interpreted with consequential significance; it shows how a teacher’s trust and bearing of equanimity can confer confidence and independence.

There are two implications for Dewey’s (1997) learning landscape, as regards Costa Rica: First, teacher-relationships are an inextricable part of Dewey’s challenge-capacity learning dynamic, cultivating self confidence in students’ capacities and bearing in the world. Second, if so, heed must be given to Friere’s

(2007) imperative that teachers' can only help learners name their own worlds – to make learning their own – through dialogical and inter-subjective relationships.

Others like Emma and Maya talked about how they felt the program's 'safety net' provided an 'extra comfort zone' and support in processing cross-cultural challenges, precursory for future independent travel. Lily, Sara, Lauren and Nell talked of how being able to meet the challenges of the experience fostered independence and imagined possibilities.

However, for Bill the trip was too restrictive; he desired more freedom to explore and discover and unveil. He did not think the Costa Rica trip had had an immensely significant impact on him. Nor did he know why exactly – citing possibilities like age, preparation, language challenges – but several times he mentioned a thwarted desire to explore on his own. These conflicting perspectives speak to a

pedagogic challenge of facilitating group learning situations: balancing competing needs.

But in the end Adrienne was 'amazed at what came out', not so much through anything she or I did, but because of students' sentience. However, students might not have been as sentient if not for an expanded sense of independence fostered through teachers balancing challenge and capacity and communicating confidence and equanimity.

Rogers (1969) says the best that teachers can do is not interfere with student learning. This may be so, but teachers are pedagogically responsible for the learning environment (Dewey, 1997), and morally responsible for relationships with their students (Jarvis, 1995). In the case of Costa Rica, both of these – learning environments and relationships with teachers – may have been antecedents for students' growing independence and for them learning beyond teachers' imagined possibilities.

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## Conclusion

To conclude, a personal revisit of a 2003 global citizenship practicum showed that teacher-facilitators of high school practicums play three important roles in cultivating cosmopolitan perspectives: being trusted elders, encouraging critical reflection, and facilitating learner independence. These roles do not function in isolation, nor can they be thought of as instruments or tools to be used by teachers on students to 'make' global citizens (Dunne, 1993). They are embedded in teacher-student relationships and reside in the person of the teacher; and therefore have implications for teaching practice that are both pedagogic and moral – and with universal reach.

Students' sense of agency, independence, and critical outlook are heightened when they trust their teachers and their teachers trust them, when their teachers foster autonomy and look at the world critically. In these circumstances students' learning may far exceed what was originally expected or anticipated. If this is the case, then the teaching and learning that happened in Costa Rica has implications far beyond a global citizenship practicum. For if what happened to students in Costa Rica derived from teachers' relationship with their students and with their world, then do those same teaching roles not matter anytime we want students to reach beyond what we might envision, imagine, or control; for when we want them to create?

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## Endnotes

- 1 International global citizenship practicum programs geared to youth abound in universities and high schools across North America (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002). Indeed they are a growing trend (Schultz & Jorgenson, 2009). These types of programs are found in many disciplines, take several different forms (e.g. work-study abroad programs, international service learning courses, etc.), and range in length anywhere from two weeks to six months or more. These programs share several characteristics. First, they are organized excursions taken by students and faculty to different countries where they are immersed in a culture different from their own (Grusky, 2000). Second, because of their international social justice emphasis, they often take place in the Global South, and include some kind of work, service, or engagement with a host community. Third, one of their stated objectives is to cultivate a sense of global citizenship.

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- 2 *Global Citizenship 41G* was a full eight-month high school global citizenship course, including weekly classes, pre- and post- Costa Rica, replete with lectures, discussions, role-plays, videos, written assignments and Spanish lessons. The course had a written curriculum with clear learning objectives, goals and outcomes (approved and authorized by *Manitoba Education*).
  - 3 Even though there is no agreed upon definition of global citizenship (Schultz & Jorgenson, 2009), a review of scholarly literature sympathetic to the concept of world citizenship (Nussbaum, 1997; Boulding, 1990; Heater, 2002; Appiah, 2008; Schattle, 2008) points to a cluster of three characteristics: A global citizen is someone who: recognizes a common humanity, and hence appeals to a universal sense of justice; has an open predisposition, being able to see the world through the lens of people who are different from themselves; has a sense of agency and responsibility, and hence is able and willing to engage the world thoughtfully, helpfully and hopefully.
  - 4 It is documented that global citizenship practicums can have beneficial effects in cultivating qualities of global citizenship; indeed, they may have a transformative impact. However, little qualitative research has been done on longer-term affects, particularly for high school youth, and on how the practicum experience is perceived and understood by participants many years later.
  - 5 CR and CR'03 denote Costa Rica and the '03 Costa Rica practicum.
  - 6 Having no expectations is in fact a nuanced statement and engages a variety of lenses of expectation. So, to be specific, this is what I think we meant: My over-riding concern, one birthed in my transient childhood, was for students not to make pre-mature and ill-informed judgments of people and circumstances, whether out of fear or ignorance. Adrienne's concern, arising from living and traveling abroad, was not wanting students to have 'preconceived notions of the people' in ways that might impede a flourishing engagement with the world.
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