A Dialogue with Students in Mexico

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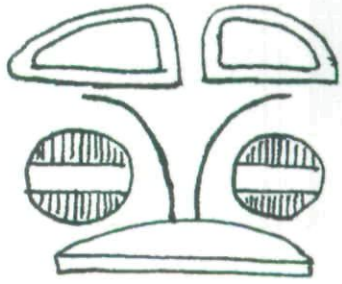
This narrative describes the author's reflections on learning with a group of Canadian social work students in Mexico. The study tour was framed in terms of creating opportunities for students to learn about the impact of social and economic policies on marginalized people, and about the personal reality of poverty and oppression. However, it is also the author's story of changed relationships with students, a new awareness of his own privilege and power, and a challenge to create new transformational learning processes within the academy.

"Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teacher. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach."

Paulo Freire (1993, p. 80)

The words penned by Paulo Freire (1993) and advanced by bell hooks (1994), aptly describe education as a practice of freedom whereby men and women reflect and act upon their world to transform it. Traditional roles of students and teachers become blurred, fall away, and are replaced by dialogue and co-investigation. Students are no longer "docile learners" and teachers experts dispensing knowledge, but both share in the learning process. Many of us who were educated in the 1970's and 1980's and who subscribed to Freirean principles have had little opportunity as educators within the academy to practice this liberating form of education. Traditional course structures, university governance policies and expectations, lecture formats, student evaluation systems, and traditional roles of faculty members have continued to create barriers for those wishing to engage in a new kind of education.

In April 2002, I landed in Mexico City with twelve Canadian social work students set to embark on an educational experience unlike any I had encountered in my twenty years as a social work educator. The next fifteen days brought an exhilarating, emotional, and exhausting immersion into Mexican culture and social conditions. In designing this study tour, we had hoped to create an opportunity for students to understand the impact of social conditions and economic policies on marginalized people, and to learn about the many creative solutions utilized by people to survive in oppressive conditions. Although the purpose of this learning activity was framed in terms of student learning, I did not realize the impact this experience would have on my own learning and on my understanding of developing relationships with students.



Like Schmitz's (1998) experience with graduate social work students, our program, which was coordinated by Global Awareness Through Experience (GATE), a U.S. organization with an office in Mexico City, provided seminars and dialogue with Mexican social workers, social activists, unionists, economists, and poor marginalized citizens, as well as site visits to various social, cultural and political organizations. Students ate local food and rode public transportation, and were encouraged to immerse themselves as much as possible in the culture and activities of local

citizens. A particularly meaningful part of the study tour took place as the group travelled to, and was hosted by, three impoverished rural communities in the state of Guanajuato. In these communities we heard the stories of women and children living in extreme conditions of poverty as the majority of the men had left the area to find work. Their local economies had been devastated by the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Each evening throughout the tour, participants met for an evening reflection to debrief the day's events and to discuss their learning and reactions to what they had seen and heard.

Throughout the study tour I kept a journal to record my own feelings and thoughts as I knew that before long they would become jumbled and confused. Although this diary contained other themes of my experience and musings while in Mexico, it formed the basis of reflections on my changed relationships with students. It was after returning to Canada that I became aware of how this experience had personally and professionally changed me and my view of both the education process and my relationship with students. In the following account I have selected a series of particularly meaningful situations in which I believe my relationship with students became a dialogue of colleagues sharing equally in the learning process.

The Arrival

We left the Mexico City Airport, packed into two very small vehicles, hot and sticky, and in very close physical contact with one another. As we proceeded at incredible speeds through heavy and what seemed to be erratic traffic, with students shrieking, I knew that the usual distance between faculty member and student had just been decimated. Upon arrival at our destination this was accentuated when I was informed that I, a male faculty member, would be bunking with the only male student on the tour. I would be spending 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with these students. The realization that I could not escape to my own privacy at the end of an extremely tiring day served to teach me that, in fact, I was no different than any of the other learners in this experience. I believe this was the beginning of redefining my role as faculty member.

Jenna – A Very Ill Student

After three days in Mexico City one of the students, Jenna (not her real name), became incredibly ill with a stomach infection. After some discussion about what to do we decided to transport her to the nearest emergency department at a local hospital. To our surprise, the hospital was a beautiful facility with all the latest medical equipment and technology. Jenna and I spent several hours in the emergency department waiting for a doctor to examine her. She was not only very ill but frightened to be in a strange place where no one spoke English. My minimal Spanish did not seem very helpful in this crisis situation and I regretted that I had not followed through on my good intention of improving my Spanish before leaving Canada. With little else to do, Jenna and I began to share stories of our upbringing, our families, our struggles, and even our successes in life. At first, I thought this was a good distraction from the constant pain she was experiencing. However, as the hours passed I found that I really enjoyed this conversation and was learning far more about Jenna than I had about most other students.

We developed a new understanding and respect for each other as people, and my role as teacher seemed completely irrelevant. I held her hand (something I would be reluctant to do in Canada), supported her in this difficult circumstance, and just listened as she cried with the pain. Jenna was treated well and recovered nicely in a couple of days. However, even after returning to Canada, it seemed as though something had changed in

the way I interacted with Jenna. We had shared a very personal experience and knew each other in a much different way than most faculty and students. I wondered how the development of a personal relationship like this would affect learning in the classroom.

Evening Reflections

A situation that proved confusing to me at first was the role I was to play at the evening reflections where participants shared their feelings and thoughts about what they had seen and heard during the day. Was I to co-facilitate this group session with the GATE co-ordinator and play the typical role of supporting students in debriefing their experience? Or was I to be a participant and share my own thoughts and feelings? If I did this, would I be honest with the students and express my true feelings, concerns, lack of understanding, and vulnerability? Evening reflections were usually very emotional sessions where participants became tearful and often expressed their sadness and anger in explicit ways. After a particularly difficult day of hearing sad story after sad story and seeing many individuals who had been disadvantaged by international economic policies, I found myself almost overcome with emotion and distress. I realized then that this was just as much a learning experience for me as it was for the students. I decided to be transparent with the group and shared my feelings, questions, and thoughts. Not surprisingly, my decision to take this risk opened the door for many of the students to share their feelings in very uninhibited ways. We talked much longer than usual that night and ended with more questions than answers. I realized that I was beginning to understand issues of poverty and oppression in a way I had not experienced before, and that I was being transformed by this experience.

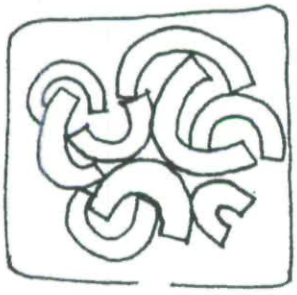
The Day Care Centre

A highlight of the study tour for many of the students was a visit to a Montesorri Day Care Centre in a working class neighbourhood of Mexico City. There is something about children that tends to lighten the spirit and bring out the best in people. We spent several hours at this centre interacting with the staff and playing with the children. The students were impressed with the creativity of the workers, who did a marvelous job of teaching and entertaining the children with none of the fancy modern toys seen in most North American day cares. What was particularly liberating for me was the opportunity to interact with both the students and the children outside of our usual roles. Although both students and faculty know that each other has families, it is not often that we actually get the opportunity to see each other in those parts of our lives. Students told me they were surprised to see me, their professor, sitting on the floor with several three year olds jumping on my back, laughing and laughing. I was reminded of how post-secondary education tends to compartmentalize the lives of students and faculty. Yet, here we were, just a group of individuals enjoying the young wonders of life together.

The Discotheque

On one particular evening, several of the students indicated that they would like to experience some of the night life in Mexico and wanted to go to a nearby discotheque. I thought this might be fun and a good break from the long, exhausting, and emotional days. In Canada I would normally be conscious of maintaining appropriate professional boundaries with students and would decline such an invitation to "party" with them. However, I went and we had a wonderful evening and were, it seemed, the talk of the club that night. We were often invited to dance, but many of the local adherents asked what country we came from where obviously no

one knew how to dance! Although not part of the planned study tour activities, the evening proved to be yet another opportunity to relate to the students on a different level. Upon falling to sleep that night, I began to question the real purpose of maintaining rigid social boundaries with students back home in Canada and wondered how this reinforced the power and dominance of faculty members and inhibited the learning process.



The Rural Communities

After seven days in Mexico City, our group travelled to three rural communities in the state of Guanajuato. Families here lived in extremely impoverished conditions but shared generously as they hosted us. In these communities, women stated that about 85 percent of the men had gone to Mexico City, the maquiladoras (export assembly plants near the U.S. border), and the United States to find work. Local agricultural economies had been devastated by NAFTA, and women and children struggled to survive with the basic necessities of life. Residents shared their stories, filled with hurt, sadness, anger, and tears, and we all cried together. Many were angry at the immigration practices of the U.S. and Canada which they described as bureaucratic, non-humanitarian, and punitive, and others were angry at the exploitation by large multi-national companies. Others simply cried because they were alone without fathers, husbands, and sons. These personal stories created an understanding of the impact of economic globalization in an entirely new way. Here, political decisions and economic policies became intensely personal, and the connection between structural inequalities and poverty became real for us privileged Canadians for the first time in our lives. At the same time, we heard stories of survival, of grassroots economic development, and of the many creative solutions local citizens initiated to deal with the harsh realities of their experience. We were saddened and encouraged at the same time. My role as teacher-of-the-students was completely torn away in this situation as I was confronted with my own privilege and power as a white well-educated male. With the students I was able to talk about my own conscientization and growth and to truly embrace the mutuality of learning.

Canadian Embassy

The experience in the rural communities was followed by a paradoxical morning at the Canadian Embassy. After waiting a lengthy time because of tight security at the Canadian Embassy (Nellie Furtado, a Canadian pop star, was also at the Embassy we were told), our group met with several Embassy staff to discuss the role and work of the Canadian Embassy in Mexico. After an initial sharing of information, students expressed outrage at the positive "spin" the Embassy placed on NAFTA, economic globalization, the neo-liberal agenda of the new Mexican government, and the denial of local economic conditions and the plight of disadvantaged citizens. Students commented on how they had just spent three days in several impoverished communities that had been devastated by NAFTA and economic globalization, and that they had not heard of any of the wonderful things that the Canadian Embassy reported they were doing. One student asked if Embassy personnel might also consider visiting these communities to hear first hand about their economic and social conditions. As the students, with great articulation, continued to express their consternation, Embassy staff looked to me as a faculty member to respond to the students, as if to say, "Can you not keep these radical students in line?" I did respond but not along the lines the Embassy staff wanted, and the students indicated that they would have none of this usual role differentiation between teacher and students. They stated that as they had asked the questions,

Embassy staff should respond to them, not to me. I was delighted to see this group of bright, articulate, well-informed, and impassioned students provide argument after argument in a rational and respectful way. No need for any professorial intervention or power with this group. Perhaps this is what Freire meant by problem-posing education and reflection and action upon the world to transform it. We were somewhat doubtful, however, that after this experience the Canadian Embassy would grant an audience to future groups of social work students.

Ramajit

One of the students who participated in the study tour was a 45-year-old Indo-Canadian woman who had been in one of my previous classes. I knew her as an intelligent but quiet woman who rarely spoke in class or group discussions. In Mexico, she became, to many of us, a wise and gentle teacher. Ramajit (not her real name) had a dark complexion and dark hair and eyes, and many local Mexicans mistook her for being Mexican. They often spoke to her in Spanish and accommodated her needs first without the attention often afforded foreigners. On several occasions I could tell that this both surprised and embarrassed her. One evening at reflection time, Ramajit commented that for the first time in her life the colour of her skin had become an advantage, and that she now understood what it was like to be part of the majority. Gradually, throughout the ten days, Ramajit shared more and more of her own experience of racism, sexism, classism and marginalization as a member of the Sikh religion in our Canadian community. She shared openly and confidently and often assisted our white students in making the connection between structural oppression in Mexico and that in Canada. I was taught immensely by this woman and began to reflect on how I had perhaps created barriers in the classroom that had not allowed Ramajit to share her insight and experience in open dialogue.

Spirituality

The GATE program in Mexico City formally ended, but students remained in Mexico for an additional five days to relax and enjoy the vibrant Mexican culture. Several students headed out in various directions from Mexico City (toward Acapulco and Veracruz), but I stayed in the city with three students to visit various historical and cultural sites. This unstructured informal leisure time offered me the opportunity to relate to students in yet another way. One warm evening, I and two students decided to get a hamburger at a local fast food restaurant. Although I knew both students quite well, I had not imagined that we would spend several hours in that restaurant in deep conversation about spirituality. Our attention during the GATE program to the religious context in Mexico had raised many important issues for the students. Both were highly committed to their Christian faith and began to share some of the personal dilemmas they had regarding the integration of faith and professional social work. They indicated that at times they had felt a conflict existed between the values and beliefs espoused by their churches and those at the School of Social Work. They further indicated that even though there had been opportunity to discuss these issues in some classes, they had been reluctant to do so for fear of reprisal and negative reactions from other students and faculty.

I was both alarmed and surprised by the negative subtext the students described as a very real part of their social work education. The two students openly shared their personal spiritual beliefs with me and asked me to do the same. It seemed as though no topic was taboo for our discussions in Mexico. I had the opportunity that evening to dialogue with students again on a level and in a way I had not previously experienced in my role at the

university. It provided a wonderful opportunity to speak together about common issues, questions, and dilemmas with no fear of breaking boundaries or inviting negative consequences by what was disclosed. We all commented on what a wonderful time this had been as we left that restaurant in the wee hours of the morning, absolutely drenched with perspiration.

Counsellor, Travel Consultant, Mediator, Friend, Parent

I would be remiss and would represent this experience unfairly if I did not mention a range of other roles I played in accompanying the students on this incredible experience. Even though the traditional barriers between student and faculty member seemed to disappear, I did not become a participant like all the other students. I did carry a number of responsibilities as faculty member which were unlike those of student participants. A number of these roles and responsibilities were ones that I would not normally take on as a faculty member in my school of social work, and I was again pushed toward redefining the faculty role. By day three there were several instances of interpersonal conflict between the students, and I served as mediator and facilitator of conflict resolution. Toward the end of the formal program, one student's partner in Canada experienced a life-threatening health problem and, in addition to providing crisis counselling and support, I assisted the student in making immediate travel arrangements back to Canada. Throughout the program, the very personal and emotional stories of Mexican people triggered for some students personal issues in their own lives, and I served as counsellor and friend. When you are thousands of kilometres from home, in an unfamiliar context and culture, it does not make sense to refer a student to a professional counsellor to deal with his or her personal concerns. And finally, most of the students were young enough to be my children, and as much as I resisted taking on any kind of parental role, I did find myself from time to time addressing these young students as if they were my children. In some cases this involved clarifying boundaries for safe personal conduct and activity in Mexico, and in one case, absolutely forbidding a student to engage in what I felt was a very unsafe activity. This showed me again that the study tour had taken me to a place with these students that was unlike anything I had ever experienced.

The Lessons

This has been a narrative about my experience with Canadian social work students in Mexico, and there have been many lessons which I hope will change the way I teach and learn in the university at home. Without hesitation or apology, I suggest that the Mexico Study Tour has personally and professionally transformed me, and I have been challenged to reconsider the way I approach my work as an educator.

First, I have been reminded that the key to learning is positive, respectful, and egalitarian relationships with students. I believe this is commonly understood in schools of social work, but many of us have not, perhaps, reflected enough on our dominance and power as teachers. Arnold, Burke, James, Martin, and Thomas (1991) have suggested that traditional educational approaches have placed learners in passive positions and that in social change education, a new educator/learner relationship needs to take hold. My experience suggests that in this new relationship, faculty need to let go of some of their power and control, become real and vulnerable, and engage the students in dialogue that represents two-way communication. This involves moving beyond the boundaries of academic relationships and relating to students in personal ways where we become co-learners. These relationships need to be respectful and to encourage

students to be active participants in shaping the learning process.

This experience has also increased my awareness of my own privilege as a white, heterosexual, educated, and able-bodied male, and the power inherent in that social location. My daughter recently said to me in a discussion about social location: "Dad, none of your social categories are disadvantaged – you've never been oppressed." She is correct, and I was reminded of my responsibility not to use the privilege given to me for my own benefit but to work for those who were less fortunate. Arnold et al (1991) indicate that educators who lack critical self-knowledge can inadvertently erase themselves from the picture by not working through basic questions about who they are and why they do what they do. Without the knowledge of how we individually and collectively become part of oppressive structures, we cannot face the challenge of social justice. The Mexico Study Tour has encouraged me to consider again how structural inequalities, poverty, and oppression are played out in my community, how I am part of those oppressive structures, and how I can become more actively involved in social action and social change.

And finally, I have learned much about actual teaching and learning processes. This experience has taught me that content and information are much less important than I often think. Instead, dialogue, reflection, experience, and problem-posing strategies are much more critical to creating transformation learning. Until this experience I had not seen students embrace and understand issues of poverty and oppression with the same depth of emotion and commitment. The issues were, in fact, for most students, still pieces of academic information which did not really touch their lives. The experience of seeing, hearing, and reflecting on the real lives of those who have been disadvantaged moved the students to consider how they might make personal and professional changes in their own lives. As not all students can engage in international study tours, this experience has challenged me to create educational processes at my own school that bring students face to face with the reality of human disadvantage.

A special thank you to all my teachers who participated in the Mexico Study Tour – you taught me well!

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