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English Language Instruction, Student Engagement, and Sustainable Practices in Rural Ecuador

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In the Morona-Santiago province and canton of Limón Indanza in Southeastern Ecuador is a township populated by various indigenous Shuar and mestizo (colonos) communities referred to as Yungantza. During the course of five trips over the past four years to this region of the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Ozanam Scholars Program has established research and service working relationships with three communities in Yungantza: El Valle del Castillo, Miguel Chiriap and Mentzankim. This experience is part of a four-year scholarship program housed in St. John's University's Vincentian Institute for Social Action which aims to develop student commitment to social justice through required coursework, international travel, and community service. This trip manifests as an anthropology course titled "Fieldwork in Global Sustainable Development" and accompanying travel to these communities during the students' junior year. During the two-week excursion, each cohort of approximately 20 Ozanam Scholars assist with development projects selected by each community prior to arrival, and provide daily English classes in three teams across three communities. Additionally, they conduct research on the conditions of each community in relation to education, public health, culture, and tourism. At the end of the trip, the students present project proposals before political representatives, teachers, students, parents, other community members and stakeholders, with the objective of opening a dialogue that will ultimately decide which projects will be carried out by the next year's cohort.

As our relationships with the communities continue to mature and more structure is implemented into the students' preparation, it is essential for us to maintain an ongoing examination and assessment of this work from an organizational, methodological and theoretical standpoint. The component of the trip that we struggle with the most is the service-oriented English workshops which are conducted in the afternoons for children and adults. Over our extended trips, we have not seen measurable change in the communities' English skills or improvement in their access to resources. Challenges that have been identified include the immediate delivery, long-term sustainability, and overall completeness of these daily workshops.

Currently, the major theoretical and practical challenges of English language education as 'aid' are not properly understood and/or retained before the trip by each cohort of students travelling there. As such, the focus of this paper is on strengths and weaknesses of the workshops that have been determined based on our experiences working with these three communities, student feedback, and the feedback received from community members. Drawing from this analysis, we will present strategies for creating equity between the various interests present within this annual, two-week experience. Our objective is meeting the primary goal of building a meaningful learning experience through student engagement that also encompasses valuable collaboration within these distinct communities in relation to their expressed development goals and expectations.

Author Information

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English Workshops – Service-Based Education

Members of each community have expressed value in English language education based on perceived practical and economic benefits, recognizing its utility in a global economy. Congruently, the current focus on English 'aid' can be better understood in relation to recent infrastructural and socio-political developments. Notably, the completion of a two-lane highway that cross-cuts the Yungantza township just before our first visit in May 2012 has led to greater market integration opportunities and accessibility to the political center in Limón. This structural improvement has developed alongside a growing initiative within the municipal government toward the proliferation of a tourism industry heavily based upon Shuar cultural traditions and ecological resources. As such, English is also viewed as a tool for agency within Shuar communities as a means to control economic development that is dependent on marketable representations of their culture. Generally, community members in favor of prioritizing the development of English education initiatives justify it in terms of promising academic and employment opportunities. There is an added benefit in being able to navigate international contexts, both abroad as well as with foreigners in their own communities. Despite the limited degree in which we have provided lasting knowledge of the language or greater access to resources, the communities have continued to find value in our contributions.

Knowing the value of the English workshops for these communities, there have not been any observable improvements in the overall English language capabilities or learning tools (resources, teachers, and methods). Though we have developed a rich institutional memory over the last four years, as demonstrated by the shift from basic preparatory workshops to an accredited class, students still struggle with adapting to unfamiliar physical and linguistic landscapes at the very same moment that we expect them to deliver coherent and engaging workshops. To combat this development, we continue to view rigorous preparation and student leadership in the process of enacting the English language workshop as a response to other "voluntourism" initiatives. Such programs put heavy emphasis on the students' act of serving as opposed to how the service promotes engaged development and collaboration with marginalized communities, especially in unfamiliar global contexts.

The organizational challenge at the heart of our concern for continued collaboration is overcoming obstacles we face in preparing our university students in a comprehensive manner, so that they may provide socially and culturally informed language workshops that also meet the needs expressed by the communities.

English Workshops – Obstacles and Opportunities

The physical context of the class environments present limitations in terms of resources as well as actual space. While each community school has its own set of classrooms, their availability is not guaranteed to our students, who host their classes after school hours (between 7:00 A.M. and 1:00 P.M.). In addition, classrooms are limited in terms of visual teaching aids, such as chalk/whiteboards, markers and technology, such as projectors. For example, students are able to use several classrooms in Metzankim. This is facilitated by the one and only teacher who is a resident of the community and is also available for any questions. However, in El Valle de Castillo, the teachers are commuters and leave promptly after school, and workshops are conducted in a large community meeting room without desks and white boards. Additionally, a better understanding of how classes develop throughout

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the course of the two weeks is needed. The fluidity of participation, both in terms of attendance and daily interest, is primarily due to daily life responsibilities that both children and adults are subject to, such as their agricultural work and child care. All of these factors hinder the ability to teach in a consistently structured manner.

The English workshops lack the specific framework found in the research portion of the trip and therefore, the outcomes of the workshops are up to the interpretations of the three teams or even by individual students on those teams. In structured reflections during the trip, our students have admitted to de-prioritizing the English workshops for several reasons. Some are very comfortable with educationally-based volunteer work and others do not see themselves as educators in any respect, resulting in a lack of preparation on both accounts. Also, the research projects are more heavily emphasized during the preparatory period as they count as a graded assignment for their anthropology class. Students ascribe a value to the workshops primarily as "relationship building tools" for the communities' youth; focusing on teaching a wide variety of concepts to remedy the lack of access to English speakers and language materials; and the importance of exchange as a counterbalance to invasive tourist practices. While these are observations and analyses, such perspectives avoid strategies necessary for effectively teaching the English language during a limited time frame. In effect, this lack of framework allows students to avoid critically thinking about how to execute their workshops to successfully address community needs in a culturally appropriate manner.

As our students express surprise and frustration at these practical and theoretical limitations, it is also evident that there is a deeper conversation needed for some of them in order to identify and overcome privileged biases that prompt them to expect a certain level of structure and resources for teaching. Students have also had less time to confront their biases about language and privilege that influence how they structure their workshops, and as a result, how they see themselves in relation to this particular aspect of community development. These conversations determine the effectiveness of our collaborative role with the communities and their needs. They also highlight whether or not we are falling short on our ethical responsibilities to the communities and insinuating ourselves as another imperial force.[1] While these issues are presented for student reflection during the trip, it is evident more time is needed to digest and assimilate these discussions beforehand.

Students must be better prepared and engaged in order to merge scholarly understanding and critical analysis of these partner communities with an openness for perspective adaptation as they encounter foreign and dynamic social realities throughout the two weeks. This encompasses not only the ability to adapt knowledge gained through coursework and preparatory workshops, but also confronting one's social position within our daily contexts, recognizing preconceptions that inform our perspectives of the people we work with. For example, students specifically struggle with the power dynamic of teaching English in communities where knowledge of the indigenous language is waning without considering expressed community needs. While this is a struggle in other aspects of the two-week program, understanding the outcomes of the English workshops in the context of a rural, marginalized society, are critical to the workshops' success.

It is essential to stress institutional knowledge and intra-cohort communication for a trip of this (high) intensity and (short) duration, encouraging

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[1]Community members have discussed with us the history of Spanish colonization and Catholic missionary presence, as well as other interest groups, who proved to be invasive to the pre-existing Shuar culture and tradition both personally and nationally. As a result, there is a severe Shuar language deficiency found within these specific communities, particularly among the younger generations. In other research, we have addressed these more technical issues of minority language rights and make a concentrated effort during the trip to include our students in discussions of linguistic imperialism and the consequences of language loss to cultural identity.

continued conversation. Upon returning to the U.S. students often discuss how preparation and prior experience do not usually register until they are in the thick of culture shock and a full-work load. As administrators (and educators), there is a clear responsibility to balance our expectations with the realities of our students, while providing them with enough space to take responsibility and push themselves towards personal understanding. As such, we encouraged students to think more specifically about how they as individuals can better engage and prepare the following cohort, a practice that we as the administration have stressed but not formalized. In effect, many of these suggestions are based on student feedback and require student initiative in their completion.

English Workshops -Strategies for Effective Student-Centered Preparation

Before the trip, it is important to push students to understand their limited resources on-site and how that affects the content of their lessons. We have proposed that teaching teams create a mock-lesson plan for their peers which they will then beta-test. From this exercise, students will submit ten lessons for peer review. The purpose is to share ideas amongst groups, to experiment with what is feasible within a lesson plan, and to understand the process of revision both during a lesson and for future lessons based on student-response. This puts the focus on the content of the lessons which we can then use to measure community engagement and language retention over time, as well as to mitigate some of the unexpected practical limitations that they will encounter.

A major proposed student-led strategy is a mentorship program during the months leading up to the trip. This initiative integrates participants from the previous years into the preparation process in order to create clear conduits for exchanging information about the daily expectations of the English workshops with contextual reflection. Sharing their own experiences of applying theory to their understanding of the communities, in addition to addressing issues of privilege and creating lesson

plans, will allow incoming students to generate questions regarding the gap between theory and practice with their peers for a more meaningful understanding and experience.

Students have proposed an annual panel to allow for a broader intra-cohort discussion amongst all previous participants and to extend the conversation to freshmen and sophomores just encountering their first collegiate discussions on social justice. This panel is an important platform for students to see themselves as individually essential to the sustainability of the Ecuador program, particularly for the English workshops that continue to build upon the knowledge and skills-base of community members. Students also proposed an informal approach: stressing daily conversations about the experience to acclimate incoming scholars to the trip's rewards and demands. These methods can be classified as both pre-trip and post-trip strategies because they encourage returning scholars to continue to reflect on their experience and prepare future students to start thinking individually about the upcoming challenges. It is also important because it necessitates that returning students create a personal strategy of how they communicate the needs and realities of the communities without romanticizing Shuar culture or unthinkingly demonizing the program's role in sustainable development.

All of these strategies are critical in terms of grounding the students' role in the process of our relationship with the communities rather than simply compartmentalizing their own experiences as part of the overall outcome. In taking responsibility for the preparation of

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incoming cohorts, it creates a form of student engagement that begins to dismantle the balance of knowledge and decision-making between students and administration in order to create a more dynamic and fulfilling experience, as well as making the English workshops a stronger asset to the communities we serve. It also roots both the preparation and debriefing of the trip in the Vincentian tradition of reflective learning and the development of a compassionate worldview.

While these engagement strategies address the less abstract issues with the English language workshops, a gap remains in how we communicate the social and cultural implications of our presence and cultivate effective and ethical teaching methods. Thus, it is essential to create a framework that clearly guides and encompasses both student and administrator perspectives about the ideal outcomes and trajectories of the workshops. This creates guidelines appropriate for undergraduate students to connect a theoretical base to practical outcomes.

Drawing from our research, we thus propose three general guidelines for promoting effective language instruction within these communities:

1. Broaden the overall purpose of learning to include social and cultural goals that ultimately lead to greater intercultural awareness and competence.
2. Develop intercultural speakers who can shift between languages and cultures, with the ability to adapt themselves to new environments, promoting collective agency and self-representation of interests before foreign and possibly exploitative entities.
3. View language learning in terms of personal development, inspiring a more self-reflective learning process.

In reflecting on these guidelines, we find that they apply to the community members receiving the English workshops and to the students developing them. These goals should both enable the communities to be intercultural communicators for their own goals and sustainability, as well as prepare our students to become more effective agents of social justice

with intercultural understanding. By creating parallels in the methods for both the students and the communities, we stress that both parties are coming together in collaboration in an attempt to balance the power and privilege dynamics of our presence.

Our strategy is then to formally present these guidelines as a topic of discussion prior to departure and encourage students to apply each point to themselves and to the community members that they have yet to meet. These discussions open conversations about linguistic privilege and the necessity to interact with community members as collaborators in their own educational experience, particularly examining how language can be a tool for empowerment and how to confront paternalistic feelings and the essentialization of indigenous cultural practices. Rather than dictating a checklist of requirements as to what the English classes should entail, this particular framework creates space for conversations about how to execute a practical application from a theoretical discussion about privilege, as well as initiate opportunities to gain critical feedback from administrators and peers.

Conclusion

In focusing on how we can better prepare our students and engage them in the process of preparing the following cohort, we leave room for them to critically think about how they can best aid the communities of Yungantza with the resources available, and in relation to initiatives selected by the communities. A strong theoretical foundation ensures that administrators and students are consistently reflecting on the dynamics of power and engaging with community members in an ethical manner. Our framework should continue conversations with the community about the value of foreign language education in their particular regional and global context and encourage students to see themselves as part of a sustainable process. As such, we have seriously considered and included engaged student-centered leadership and involvement in the practical strategies before and after the trip. In many ways, our efforts very simply reflect

the need to keep volunteer efforts grounded in an understanding of community realities, ensuring that the experience will contribute to a sustainable positive change. Where many universities and organizations provide volunteer experiences similar in theory, we hope to improve on traditional models by supporting projects that are driven by scholarly research and community-based partnership, that in the end, effectively serve the needs of the community and its members with dignity.

Acknowledgements

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