Exploring Uncomfortable Pedagogy: When Experiential Learning Meets Student Discomfort

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Presenters

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Goals for this session

- To open discussions about the challenges and opportunities of working with Generation Z students in sensitive experiential learning environments
- To learn about resilience from a psychological perspective and discuss how we may assist students in acquiring the personal resilience to enable them to cope with difficult cross-cultural and interpersonal interactions
- To consider the challenges of preparing students before they go abroad to push their “comfort zones”
- To examine real life case studies
  - discuss issues and challenges
  - generate ideas for implementation, both pre-departure and on-site
  - begin to formulate potential best practices, including possible interventions for faculty on-site facing these challenges
Agenda

► Introduction and background
► Experiential learning and Comfort theory
► Resilience - psychological perspective
► Preparing students before they go abroad - issues and challenges
► Case Studies
► Discussion
Uncomfortable Pedagogy: When Experiential Learning Meets the Discomfort of Students

“I have found through the years that many of my students who bitch endlessly while they are taking my classes contact me at a later date to talk about how much that experience meant to them, how much they learned” (hooks, 41-42).

From bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress (1994)
Questions to reflect upon through this session

• How can we best convey to our students that growth and transformation always have an element of discomfort?
• How do we build resilience in the study abroad context?
• Are there specific interventions that would prepare students for “uncomfortable pedagogy” before they go abroad?
• Are there specific interventions that would prepare students for “uncomfortable pedagogy” in on-site orientation?
• What are the most effective practices in facilitating experiential learning activities?
• How can unexpected learning/teaching moments be equally as valuable as pre-planned activities?
DIS Mission

By inspiring each student’s curiosity and love of learning, DIS fosters academic achievement, intercultural understanding, and development of life skills essential for engaged citizenship.
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

One of the teaching principles at DIS

DIS prides itself on its hands-on experiential learning style, as engaging pedagogy has proven to be conducive to higher levels of learning.

Experiential learning takes place through Field Studies, Core Course Week, Study Tours, case studies, and practicums - or by giving your students interview assignments, role-playing, or simulation games of real life dilemmas.
Program Study Tours

- Faculty-led
- Course-integrated
- Mandatory
- Included in tuition
- Academic visits
- Cultural visits
- Destinations across Europe
Scandinavia as your home, Europe your classroom
Burning issues
Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model

Concrete Experience
Feelings

Diverging
feel and watch

Reflective
Observation
Watching

Active
Experimentation
Doing

Converging
think and do

Assimilating
think and watch

Perception

Abstract
Conceptualisation
Thinking

Continuum

Accommodating
feel and do

Processing

Continuum
Critiques of David Kolb's theory of experiential learning

- David Kolb - from a training perspective (Forrest)
- David Kolb - from an informal education perspective (Smith)
- David Kolb - from an adult education and ESL perspective (Kelly)
- David Kolb - from a psychological and philosophical perspective (Heron)
- David Kolb - from an experiential education perspective (Loynes and Dickson)
- David Kolb - from a lifelong education perspective (Miettinen)
- David Kolb - from a management education perspective (Vince; Reynolds; Holman et al.; Beard and Wilson)
- David Kolb - from the perspective of dialogical experiential learning (Desmond and Jowitt)
- David Kolb - from a pedagogical perspective (Atherton)
- David Kolb - from a human potential perspective (Tosey and Gregory)
- David Kolb - from a learning theory perspective (Webb)
- David Kolb - from a learning styles perspective (Coffield at al)
- David Kolb (and others) - from a feminist perspective (Michelson)
- David Kolb (and other constructivists) - from a socio-cultural perspective (Seaman)
- David Kolb - from a socially rich interactive digital media perspective (Wheeler)
- Experience, Reflect, Critique: The End of the “Learning Cycles” Era (Seaman)

from several perspectives, including: historical, methodological, epistemological, sociocultural and ecological

Source: http://reviewing.co.uk/research/experiential.learning.htm#Critiques_of_David_Kolbs_theory
Co-Constructed Developmental Teaching Theory

1. Framing
2. Activity
3. Direct Debriefing
4. Bridge Building
5. Assimilation

Learning Zone Model

Legend:
- Panic Zone-High Distress
- Panic Zone-Low Distress
- Learning Zone-High Eustress
- Learning Zone-Low Eustress
- Comfort Zone

Goal to maximize student learning
Preparing students without priming them to worry:

A Positive Psychology Approach
So if challenge and discomfort are precursors to growth ... how do we keep students engaged and focused on where they are (cf., their phones) to meet this opportunity?
How do we use what we know about *shaping behavior* to support *resilience* and *grit*?
We have multiple intervention points many that you are already using!

Work done on one’s home campus → During orientation at one’s host campus → On-going while abroad → Processing once home

But, we may be able to use some of these more efficiently!
We have multiple intervention points many that you are already using!

- Work done on one’s home campus
- During orientation at one’s host campus
- On-going while abroad
- Processing once home

Challenges:
1. Role overload
2. High cognitive load
3. Busy

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Interventions to reduce reactivity and anxiety e.g., Journaling, Mindful awareness and attention

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Interventions to reduce reactivity and anxiety e.g., Journaling Mindful awareness and attention

Shaping one’s recall for growth and then sharing experiences with the next group

But, we may be able to use some of these more efficiently!
Wise Psychological Interventions (Walton, 2014).

- Small changes matter - both before they leave and as they arrive
- Draw on the Mindset research (Carol Dweck, 2006) to help students recognize they are resilient
  & they and will become increasingly comfortable as they repeatedly go through (practice) uncomfortable experiences
- Help students simply notice cultural differences
  - Increase mindfulness (see Ellen Langer)
  - Reduce emotional reactance
  - Allow for psychological distance
  - How? Journaling exercises and these can be the basis for sharing experiences later
Uncomfortable pedagogy - Preparing students before they go abroad

- Current climate on US college campuses
- The role of social media
- Pre-departure orientation challenges
Current climate on US college campuses

- Diversity and inclusion
- Cultural appropriation
- Microaggressions
- Safe spaces
- Trigger warnings
- Freedom of speech
- Students as “snowflakes”

- If students struggle with discussing difficult and uncomfortable issues on their home campuses, why do we think they will be able to face these kinds of situations abroad, when they are even more outside of their “comfort zone”??
Uncomfortable Pedagogy: The role of social media

Constant connections with family and friends at home potentially mean that students are never fully present in their study abroad experience, taking the comforts of “home” with them everywhere.
Uncomfortable Pedagogy: The role of social media

- We know from research*: more frequent student/parent communication (via technology) → less student autonomy & self-regulation; increased parental behavioral & academic regulation
- Parental regulation during college → no beneficial correlations
- Student self-regulation → positively correlated with: overall satisfaction with college, enthusiasm for learning, positive relationships with both peers and professors, & overall grade point average
- Distractions provided by technology → negative influence: students seem to be more interested in presenting their experience on social media rather than actually being present in the experience itself
- Students’ reliance on online support networks → higher stress levels, lower goal achievement, & less immersion in the host culture.

*See References
Pre-departure orientation challenges

- More fear and safety concerns in today’s world—aren’t today’s students more afraid of discomfort?
- Changing the language we use in study abroad
  - Stop using the term “culture shock” (implies pathology, anxiety, stress, alienation, helplessness)
  - Talk more about facing challenge, coping skills, resilience, adaptation, dealing with loneliness, stress management, tolerance for ambiguity
  - Talk about being uncomfortable as a positive experience which results in learning and growth
- Challenges of dealing with abstract topics during pre-departure orientation—students are often not ready for this material
- How to strike a balance between excitement and enthusiasm for the study abroad experience and talking about potential difficulties
Points to Ponder

- Study abroad is not a safe space
- Being uncomfortable does not mean being unsafe or afraid
- Resilience is a process, not a trait
- Discomfort is transformative

“...those of us who agree that one of the primary goals of education should be to make students ‘uncomfortable,’ should remember that in order to make students uncomfortable, they must first feel secure... But I’ve also learned ... that security must be a given. Put another way, anxious and afraid are not synonyms for ‘uncomfortable.’” (Warner, J. I Want to Make Students Uncomfortable. Inside Higher Ed. August 21, 2016)
a comfort zone is a beautiful place but nothing ever grows there.
Case Studies: Questions to discuss

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Case Studies

Globalized Islam and Sharia Law

After reading theoretical texts on sharia law in the beginning of the semester, students were asked to simulate a divorce case in a sharia court. It was meant as preparation for the next module on the application of sharia in a Western context. The game was developed in order to enhance student understanding of the feelings and power dynamics related to the practice of sharia in a Western context that cannot be learned through reading texts. The students were asked to dress up as Danish Muslims. The game was based on a real case, and the professor had consulted with women in the Muslim community in Copenhagen on how to make the case realistic in terms of outcomes and power dynamics, and the Muslim women embraced the simulation game with enthusiasm. Though dressing up is optional for the students, most students participated and saw a great value in it.

One student, who was majoring in Gender Studies, got very upset about the whole exercise, finding the ‘dressing up’ as Muslims to be highly offensive and uncomfortable, allowing for the trivialization and appropriation of a culture that most students have no connection to. The professor explained that the dress up is an opening for students to explore these stereotypes and used them in the game because they are part of the real world, and because the hijab, dress, and gender overall are such contested issues, but the student was not convinced and complained to the DIS administration.
Case Studies

Competing Narratives: Modern European History

This class mainly focused on different narratives of WW2 and the Holocaust, as well as the narratives related to this in relation to key issues, such as Victims, Perpetrators and Bystanders. The class had gone through preparation in the classroom on both background and key interpretations and had also performed a number of group exercises and written assignments on issues related to the subject. High interaction and critical reflection on all readings and lectures had been prioritized from the start. In addition, the class had travelled on a 3-day tour to the Danish-German borderland. The class functioned well as a group. On the 6-day long study tour to Germany after four days of intensive work involving guest-lectures, presentation, museum visits and in-situ walks in both Warsaw and Berlin, the class visited the Concentration camp of Sachsenhausen outside Berlin, where more than 30,000 prisoners (mostly non-Jewish) were killed by the Nazi-regime during the War. We used a local and very competent guide during our visit to the Camp. The students asked questions, took pictures etc. Nothing unusual.

After the guided-tour ended, I decided to add a non-scheduled visit, since we had some extra time. Just next to the Concentration Camp (200 meters from the camp), a cemetery had been made on the location of the mass-graves of the post-war Soviet Special-Camp for political prisoners, where approximately 12,000-15,000 people died. Among the victims were both former guards from the Sachsenhausen camp, as well as civilians that the Soviets deemed as potential enemies. I had not visited the little cemetery before and the guide could not take us there, but said that it was perfectly fine for us to go there on our own.

Outside the cemetery, there was a small iron gate only one meter high. It was not locked, but difficult to get in unless you walked over the little fence and opened it from the inner side. We went in and walked to a small text plate, and I explained the history of the place, as well as the main layout. In the center of the cemetery stood a large cross, and the green lawn leading to it was the site of the actual mass graves of the victims. In order to reach the central Memorial, we had to cross the cemetery. I explained to the students that this was perfectly normal and we could see that local Germans were doing the same. I went ahead with my assistant, but when I reached the cross and looked back, only a half of the class had followed. I signaled to the others to come, but they refused. I then went and told them to come. They came only after some hesitation. I then gathered the group and told them once again that they were not breaking any laws and asked why they would not follow. Some said that they felt very “uncomfortable walking on a mass grave,” others said “that I was insulting them by asking them to follow,” and yet others said that it “was not necessary to expose them to this” and that it was not academic. I asked them if they had not felt the same, when they walked in the Concentration Camp for several hours just before. The answers were generally that they had not. When asked why this was the case, they said that it had been different there because there were signs and paths to follow, and there had been a guide. Other students who had crossed the cemetery initially did not agree with the impressions of the others, and the class seemed split down the middle.
Case Studies

Child development and diversity

On a cold winter day in February at the Ribe Viking center, 17 DIS students learned about the Danish production schools, had a home cooked meal by the students of the production school, saw amazing creative workshops, and were simply inspired. Later, they stood in the cold and were faced with three Danes dressed as Vikings ready for live action role-play. Little had been said ahead of time other than there will be a role-playing event. They started by lining the DIS students up and then giving them a long rope to hold on to. In the hands of the Vikings were whips and a slave collar with chain. The Vikings introduced themselves as Vikings and told the students that they were slaves in the Viking age...

While the students greatly appreciated the introduction to the production school, many students evaluated the role-play as ethically and morally incorrect and a traumatizing experience. The role-play was presented as more of a "fun" thing to do, one that Danish kids really enjoyed playing, but not an educational session for people to reflect on the history. Later in the students’ evaluations, there were comments that Danes are not as sensitive and as serious about issues such as racism.
Case Studies

Cultural Diversity and Integration

A long study tour to Rome included a visit to a day center for refugees in the heart of the city, run by a Catholic charity organization. The center welcomes 200+ guests each weekday. The scope of services offered in the center range from basic assistance to settlement services, and address the needs of the whole person. The center offered different activities, and students were asked to engage with the refugees and ask questions relevant to the objectives of the tour. There were no strict guidelines. The experience was supposed to put the theoretical discussions the students had in class about migration and integration into the real life context. Both the center and the users of the center were used to service learning student groups and appreciated the interaction with our students. Some of the students immensely enjoyed this unique opportunity, while others felt uncomfortable because of the power dynamic, which felt exploitative to them.
Thank you!
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