A Multiplier Effect: Group Study Abroad and Expressive Arts as Leadership Pedagogy

By Mary Anne Peabody & Tara Grey Coste

Abstract: To successfully develop college students’ leadership knowledge and skills, faculty must create impactful learning environments. When faculty combine several high-impact pedagogical practices, a powerful multiplying effect can be seen. This article describes a study abroad service learning program that utilizes the expressive arts as a core pedagogical technique. Drumming, song, dance, and movement highlight individual and group talents. Visual images provide metaphoric dialogue helpful for identifying
strengths, challenges, dreams, and actionable steps. We believe that adding expressive arts into the study abroad experience has produced a robust pedagogical arena in which students’ potential for shared leadership and learning is dramatically enhanced.

Building leadership knowledge and skills in students effectively requires educators to create powerful, inspirational learning environments. Kuh (2008) identifies experiential learning as one of several high-impact educational practices along with other approaches such as collaborative assignments, writing intensive courses, immersive experiences (internships, fieldwork, student teaching), diversity/global learning, community engaged/service-learning opportunities, and interdisciplinary cross-curricula courses. Immersive study abroad courses are a form of experiential learning pedagogy that align with the constructivist theory of learning in which learners play a critical role in co-constructing and assessing their own learning (Wurdinger, 2005).

In addition to the increasing attention given to experiential learning as a popular leadership development intervention (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2004), there is nascent interest in the pedagogical use of expressive arts (Hall, 2008; Marcic, 2002; Olson, 2005; Stone, 2005). Examples of expressive arts pedagogy can include movement, dance, song, dialogue, poetry, community drumming, and artwork. When putting together our leadership study abroad program in South Africa, we saw a significant opportunity to blend experiential learning with expressive arts in a two-week service learning travel course that would have truly lasting influence.

We believe when faculty combine several high-impact pedagogical practices, the result has a dynamic multiplying effect that produces a unique opportunity for leadership development. Adding expressive arts to the travel abroad experience is like adding a spicy accelerator to an already powerful pedagogical recipe. Expressive arts become the primary mode of communication and the driving force for social connections offering students opportunities to explore both intrapersonal and interpersonal phenomena. The expressive arts components speed up interactions, group cohesion, emotional sharing, and unleash creativity. They hasten unexpected connections, metaphoric meaning making, and viewing the unfamiliar in new ways.

Thus, the expressive arts are at the core of our short-term group travel program. Briefly, Leadership Study Abroad in South Africa: The Montagu Project is an inter-organizational global initiative with a goal to improve the leadership abilities of youth in rural South Africa and American leadership studies students through expressive arts. The objectives of the course are to provide students an opportunity to develop intercultural understanding, to deepen their comprehension of the leadership principles that impact social change, to understand South Africa history and the current context, and to examine how they, as empowered individuals, can contribute as globally sensitive leaders in their own communities.
The expressive arts pedagogical approaches utilized in the project include the use of song, dance, and movement to highlight individual, small group, and full group talents as well as the use of visual images to offer metaphoric dialogue helpful for identifying and expressing leadership strengths, challenges, dreams, and actionable steps. South African participants and American university students create and collaborate with one another under tight deadlines that require negotiation, utilizing self and others’ strengths, and circumnavigating the roles of both leader and follower.

All of these experiences are planned with ample time for reflection and debriefing so that they make pedagogical sense, rather than just having performance experiences for the sake of fun. An example would be the use of community drumming and dialogue in which participants utilize the skills of observation, active listening, and communicating with positive intent. As the musical and rhythmic talents of participants are quite varied, an atmosphere of supported risk-taking, persistence, and encouragement is carefully created. Effective debriefing techniques model sensitive dialogue that allows for emotional connection both with the leadership content and with one another.

When the pedagogical practices of group study abroad and expressive arts are integrated, students experience notable transformative learning. For example, one student wrote in her reflections:

“I learned that even the most confident and outgoing people get nervous and that’s what makes us whole. I was shown there is so much depth in someone’s soul and that is part of being a role model, to not be afraid of that. I was shown humor can make a bad story make sense and a good story be great. I was shown a passion for movement and emotions and that intimate connections can be made without words and through the common love of dance. What I learned about myself is that I have a way of guiding people in a situation, to be a mediator when needed, a facilitator when needed, an onlooker, and a participant. I can play these roles, because they are all part of who I am. (S. Brown, personal communication, August 4, 2016)”

While we are fortunate to partner with skilled expressive arts facilitators (Red Zebra SA and the Rural Arts Development Foundation), we believe that an expressive arts pedagogical approach can be replicated by other leadership faculty with intentional pedagogical forethought. Identifying and tapping into interdisciplinary minded faculty members with interest or pedagogical expertise in areas such as arts education or expressive arts therapy should enable leadership educators to develop a similarly impactful travel course.

Below are some additional practical tips for bringing expressive arts pedagogy into your study abroad courses:

- It is critical that there be continuous linking of the expressive arts activities to leadership competencies, skills, and abilities. If educators do not consistently do so in meaningful and rigorous ways, they may run the risk of students not understanding the connections or of transferability to the leadership studies field.
- Program leaders must openly discuss with students that global leadership experiences and expressive art participation may induce ruptures from the familiar which can create “disorientation lessons.” While uncomfortable, these experiences are often important fodder for personal growth, leadership skills development, and class discussions.
If movement and dance are one of the modalities included in an expressive arts experience, it is important for educators to think about the physical stamina required by participation. While accommodations can be made to model inclusivity there should be the opportunity for a student to opt out and instructors should be mindful of this concern and prepare students in the group accordingly.

Thoughtful pacing of expressive arts and community-building activities throughout the travel experience is critical. Group process activities intentionally placed at various points in the experience offer teachable moments in leadership competencies. In our program, for example, cooking community breakfasts together and engaging in evening debriefing sessions provided opportunities for participating in both surface conversations and deeper reflections.

Study abroad is a 24/7 group dynamics laboratory that clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of remaining creative, adaptable, and inclusive. Providing ample time for reflection on how the students can bring their learning home to their own leadership contexts is vital both to individual growth and to developing broader leadership influence in students’ local communities.

As stated by Montgomery and Arensdorf (2012), students and faculty who participate in leadership-centered study abroad experiences together foster the development of global competencies that simply cannot be achieved in a traditional classroom setting. We believe that adding expressive arts into the study abroad experience creates a remarkable multiplier effect, a powerful pedagogical recipe that vastly enhances shared leadership and learning.

References


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PAUSE for Pedagogy aims to connect leadership education theory to practice and seeks to take lessons learned in the classroom to expand our theoretical knowledge of teaching and learning. Written for both the experienced educator and those new to the profession, this column will add tools to readers’ pedagogical toolboxes. Most columns are accompanied by a video interview with the author exploring the ideas raised in the article in more detail. The series is edited by Lisa Endersby and Dan Jenkins, members of ILA’s Leadership Education Member Interest Group. Have you implemented an innovative practice in your leadership education? Contact Dan and Lisa at pauseforpedagogy@ila-net.com.

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