



Engagement Practice as Collaborative Inquiry and as a Methodological Stance against Neoliberalism in Higher Education

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Abstract

Community engagement pedagogies linked to academic service learning that combine learning goals and community service with community in ways that enhance community collaboration and both student growth and the common good have grown in popularity because of their benefits to both students and communities. At the same, however, higher education organizations have succumbed to the pervasive neoliberal ethos of our time that contributes to the marginalization of more collective, democratic and active learning approaches. This article draws on the scholarship of engagement to reflect on and appraise my own community engagement practice to reestablish the Alta Vista study abroad summer program once sponsored by my university. The analysis highlights the collaborative nature of my efforts to plan, implement, and achieve the program's goals and illustrates the instrumental role community engagement as collaborative inquiry can play in the generation of the program's outcomes. The manuscript places a strong emphasis on the role of collaborative inquiry as a research methodology and as a countervailing force to the neoliberal methodological tradition in higher education and the resultant marginalization of collaborative forms of inquiry.

Keywords: Collaborative action research; Community engagement as collaborative inquiry; Community engagement pedagogies; Engagement interface framework of engaged Learning; Globalization; Neoliberalism in higher education; Study abroad program

Introduction

In addition to teaching (and learning) and research, 'engagement' now defines the core business of the modern university. The 'engagement' label embraced by colleges and universities describes their activities to enhance community quality of life. The term began to replace or accompany 'service' and 'outreach' in the 1990s, as Higher Education (HE) sought to contribute to a more engaged university [1].

Beyond the shift in labels to describe university commitment to the public interest, there has been greater administrative emphasis on valuing engagement and creating opportunities for faculty, students and staff to collaborate with residents as partners in addressing community concerns. Similarly, community engagement pedagogies linked to academic service learning goals and community service in ways that enhance both student growth

and the common good have growth in popularity. In the globalized age [2], these learning methods are increasingly being integrated into study abroad programs, another increasingly popular and powerful pedagogical tools in its own right.

As social scientists continue to account for the many changes resulting from the development of global capitalism, another reasonably clear development in HE is neoliberalism's implications for 'knowledge-producing practices', particularly 'the contexts in which social research is conducted' [3]. Hardy, Salo, and Ronnerman [4] note, for example, 'the marginalization of more collective, democratic and active approaches to teachers' learning, and a preponderance of individual "professions development" programs and initiatives' (5). Jordon and Wood [5] point out that despite its social origins and radical traditions, Participatory Action Research (PAR) and other forms of participatory research have increasingly been subject to a subtle process of institutionalization and co-option by mainstream social science. They fear that these methodologies will fall victim to what [6] refers to as 'blind drift,' a process by which innovative methodologies are becoming 'assimilated and subordinated to an emerging hegemony of neopositivist mixed methods and evidence-based research.'

In this article, I engage in reflective practice as professional development [7] to appraise my experience as faculty in the role of study abroad program leader, with the responsibility of initiating, organizing, and driving [8] efforts to reestablish the Alta Vista community engagement study abroad summer program at my university as a form of collaborative inquiry. The exercise is meant to both inform engagement practice as well as understand collaborative action research as a methodological stance against the neoliberal tradition. Using reflective practice as a frame of reference, I retrace my steps and explore 'my own experience in practice' (Kinsella 2007) [9] as leader of the Alta Vista study abroad program to reappraise community engagement learning interpreted in terms of action research as collaborative inquiry.

The aim of this paper is to examine the characteristics of my engagement work to reinstate the Alta Vista study abroad program from the perspective of collaborative action research as collaborative inquiry. It also aims to better understand collaborative action research and inquiry as a methodological stance against the neoliberal tradition. To achieve these objectives, I rely on the 'engagement interface framework of engaged learning' [10], a conceptual framework that constitutes a theory of community engagement practice grounded in the authors' own experiential knowledge. The 'engagement interface' is regarded the setting where the work of engagement takes place. 'It is the dynamic, evolving and co-constructed space-a collaborative community of inquiry,' where collaborators from the academy and community engage each other to address pressing social issues and problems [10]. Rather than view engagement scholarship strictly in term of an idealized scientific process, this theory of practice interprets engagement as 'collaborative inquiry,' understood as 'a process consisting of repeated episodes of reflection and action through which a group of peers strives to answer a question of importance to them,' [10].

Background: Globalization, Neoliberalism, and Higher Education

The Reagan-Thatcher era is recognized as marking the start of the conservative political-economic response to Keynesian economics and the welfare state and a return to 'market fundamentalism' [11]. This conservative social philosophy has grown and endured and has come to be known by some scholars as 'neoliberalism' [12,13]. Rhoades and Torres [14] make the point that globalization is the vehicle of neoliberalism, which in turn has marked the character of globalization, particularly its political and economic aspects. Others challenge the proliferation of economic neoliberalism [15] as well as its relation to globalization [16], viewed as the global spread of business and services as well as key economic, social, and cultural practices to a world market [17]. Wikan questions, in particular, whether neoliberalism is the main driver of globalization, arguing that globalization is much richer

and more multi-dimensional than the term 'neoliberalism' suggests. Others point to the 'path dependent' nature of neoliberalism, taking on locally specific forms as market rationalities are processed through local institutional arrangements and environments [18,19]. Despite questions about economic neoliberalism and its relation to globalization, it is now commonly understood that the world has entered a new globalized era, where the institutional and organizational restructuring of society in response to this global change have progressively moved toward the neoliberalist position [2].

The effects of globalization are pervasive and generally cut across all spheres of human activity [2,20]. One effect is the organizational change triggered in institutions of Higher Education (HE) in the United States and other western nations [21,22]. Advocates for change argue that universities need to adopt an entrepreneurial approach that values and nurtures innovation to ensure adaptability if they are to fulfill their intellectual and social purpose [23]. Similarly, Smith [24] argues that the role of the university is to foster creativity and responsiveness to change. In Europe, the Bologna process has encouraged a converged system of European HE and led to the development of internationalization strategies such as staff exchanges [8]. In the United States, study abroad education and student global engagement are essential to increasing both economic and homeland security [25]. Colleges and universities are increasingly in competition in preparing students for a global world through participation in international experiences. In recent decades study abroad, programs have proliferated and each year, become more attractive as a recruiting tool for colleges and universities [26], so such increases in student participant numbers are likely to continue.

As with globalization, the effects of the neoliberal ethos of our time are pervasive and cut across all domains of human activity [3]. The neoliberalist paradigm of today offers a powerful economic theoretical construct that dominates much of economic policy, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom [13]. Neoliberal theory claims a free market economy offers the ideal of free individual choice but also achieves optimum economic performance. As a policy regime, neoliberalism describes a set of familiar economic principles, among them trade and financial liberation, deregulation, privatization, and diminished public spending on social programs [27]. However, neoliberalism also functions as a form of citizenship or subjectivity where policy shifts associated with it 'are justified through appeals to a set of powerful discourses that have filtered into everyday practices and encounters: individual liberty, free and fair competition, and personal choice' [28]. As a form of subjectivity, neoliberalism promotes self-reliance, personal responsibility, individual choice, and family values. At the same time, however, it discourages social solidarity and collective action [22]. College students, for example, are increasingly competitive, have a declining interest in

the liberal arts and teaching careers, and a decreasing support of governmental action as a means of combating social and economic issues [20].

To some scholars, HE organizations have simply succumbed to neoliberalism, becoming largely concerned with money, prestige, and winning [12]. Viewed through neoliberal ideology, the influence of globalization on HE is seen to embrace the ideology of the market, new institutional economics based on cost-recovery and entrepreneurialism, accountability, and new managerialism [29]. According to Kezar [30], the neoliberal conservative philosophy manifests in three major trends in HE: privatization, commercialization, and corporatization. Other issues in HE that arise from neoliberalism are the following: the academic stratification of the disciplines; the adoption of practices and values from the private sector, such as accountability; the commercialization of athletics, research, and the educational process; the increase in consumerism and corporatism inside the classroom; and the move toward the hard and applied sciences and away from the social sciences and humanities [29]. Additionally, the increased marketization of education in the United States and England has resulted in the exacerbation of inequalities between and within schools [31]. Giroux [32] also argues that neoliberal forces are currently transforming universities into anti-democratic public spheres, where the right of faculty to work in an autonomous and critical fashion is under attack. Neoliberal principles are evident in the context of teacher and other adult learning in the form of compliance with various audit technologies and the multitude of individual professional development [4]. Although these global trends are well known, the response by HE to neoliberal tendencies has been less than homogeneous; national politics, policy, and historically rooted cultural features of HE institutions, which are challenged by globalization, are changing at different paces [2].

Despite the marginalizing impact of neoliberalism on knowledge-producing services, action research approaches and collaborative inquiry continue to grow in popularity and new advances continue to occur [3]. Across different professions, there is increasing recognition that community-based research offers one set of explanations regarding why the process of community engagement might be useful in addressing social problems [33]. Additionally, faculty members are not letting the growth in neoliberal principles and practices in HE go uncontested. Voices of discontent are growing across the teaching and learning professions [4,5,12,20,34]. Increasingly teachers are calling for and taking alternative actions. Recently, a simple three-step approach was proposed to university faculty as a way to combat neoliberalism in community engagement in higher education: 'First, name it, i.e., name neoliberalism for what it is. Second, disdain it, i.e., disdain neoliberalism for what it does. And, third, proclaim it, i.e., offer reasonable and practical alternatives to counter/replace neoliberalism's hold' [12]. Similarly, scholars of

professional development in teacher education have proposed the Nordic tradition of educational action research, which promotes more collaborative learning based on democratic values, as an alternative resource to the neoliberal individualized tools for professional development currently seen in HE [4].

There is also pushback to neoliberalist practice in the core HE area of community engagement, where action research serves as a serious research platform [1]. These scholars are challenging university neoliberal reforms to accommodate the engagement and outreach movement. They claim these neoliberal reforms are part of a larger and more significant 'administrative discourse' in engagement that enables the university 'to occupy, if not own, the engagement space' [10]. The faculty is urged to respond by engaging in what they call 'outreach as scholarly expression' [35]-the quest associated with understanding outreach work more completely and deeply, by writing about the work faculty do in the name of scholarly engagement and outreach.

Methodological Considerations

Seen as a methodological stance against the neoliberal tradition, community engagement as collaborative action research contests many of the principles and practices in neoliberalism that tends to marginalize collaborative social inquiry. To the authors of the engagement interphase framework of engaged learning, engagement as collaborative inquiry goes beyond the instrumental role of answering questions of mutual importance in addressing social problems. It is also a stance that takes seriously the concept of 'peers,' which means that 'participants are colleagues in a jointly defined and undertaken enterprise,' with power distributed equitably among partners, open transactions, and the sincere authentic desire to learn from and with each other. A third quality of engagement as collaborative inquiry is that for its participants it 'holds the prospect of personal transformation' [10], as engagement can affect them deeply, provided there is authentic reflection on the interests that motivate their participation. Still another feature of collaborative inquiry that challenges the neoliberal research tradition is recognition of its normative intent. Scholars of engaged learning contend that collaborative inquiry typically aligns to the reality of a postmodern world. Their scholarship tends to give explicit recognition to the importance of such issues as 'ecological responsibility, ethnical comportment, cultural respectfulness, and spiritual attentiveness' [10].

According to the architects of the engagement interface framework, the outcome of faculty work in community engagement as collaborative inquiry is 'engaged learning', a practice outcome in the engagement interface which emphasizes shared learning and an ethos of mutuality, respectfulness, and stewardship. It relies on dialogue and inclusive wellbeing to guide engagement work. Fear and his colleagues include the following among the distinctive essential features of engaged learning as practiced

in the engagement interface: a) engaging in a joint construction of purposes; b) developing shared norms; c) bringing unique perspectives and skills to bear in practice; and d) engaging in the shared appraisal of outcomes.

Engagement as collaborative inquiry resonates with me because of my experience in community economic development, where the inclination by faculty to engage the community-the individuals, and local institutions and businesses-in the search for solutions has long been considered necessary to achieve community improvement. However, in addition to being effective practice, collaborative inquiry also challenges the neoliberal approach to scholarship as technical rationality, a term used to describe an 'epistemology of practice derived from positivist philosophy' [7]. Hence in proposing their engagement interface framework, the designers present not only an alternative to the dominant administrative discourse on engagement, but also a critique of traditional engagement scholarship interpreted as an idealized process, where work is undertaken in a controlled, or otherwise stable environment with those responsible in control [10]. Fear and his community of scholars use the engagement interface framework to challenge that image of engagement work, interpreting engagement instead as 'a participatory and collaborative process as expert and local knowledge systems merge to address compelling issues located in time and context.' According to the authors, 'Embracing such a stance involves, first and foremost, respect for people and place, followed by understanding one's responsibilities as a participant-collaborator in an engaged relationship'. Such is the standard for faculty community engagement by which I choose to reflect on my investigative work as faculty leader to reestablish the Alta Vista study abroad program.

The Alta Vista Study Abroad Program

The Alta Vista study abroad program I was invited to reinstate after it had been suspended was one of the few programs at my university with a community engagement focus. The primary goal of the program was to use cultural and language immersion as well as service and research projects to enhance the quality of the interdisciplinary learning experience for students. The program also intended to increase the students' capacity to work in partnership with local community organizations to help address the social and economic needs of the people and organizations in the community. In preparation for their experience, students were required to participate in a twenty-hour module on collaborative community engagement and qualitative methods, including action research. While abroad, community engagement included three critical components, all considered essential if students were to engage in meaningful ways with the community. These were Spanish language competency; an understanding of the country's history, culture, community structure, social norms, and development

challenges; and opportunities for both service learning through internships and active learning through action research projects undertaken in partnership with nonprofit organizations and public-sector agencies in the community [36].

To achieve the program's student-learning goals, students resided in the homes of local families for twelve weeks, interacted freely with residents, made visits to natural, archeological and cultural sites, and took classes in Spanish from native professors. Students commenced their Alta Vista study abroad experience by traveling to the city of El Rincon where they lived for five and one-half weeks with host families while enrolled in a Spanish language school to improve their Spanish and cultural understanding. The community of Alta Vista, where the students undertook their community engagement projects, faced 80% poverty rates and 60% malnutrition rates in children. These development challenges and the receptivity of the community to the program, as well as the fact that Spanish was the native language in the region, gave students the opportunity to apply their academic and cultural knowledge, as well as their language and research skills, to the development goals of the community. These conditions made Alta Vista an ideal community for achieving the goals of the study abroad program.

As the program leader I was responsible for developing the curriculum and for identifying the community-based organizations and research projects that best matched both the students interests and the service and research priorities identified by the community. Preliminary decisions were made in the spring semester, prior to the students' departure abroad in May. In making these decisions, I consulted with the previous program director and his staff and with students. I also consulted with Fernando, a resident of Alta Vista whom I hired as the project's onsite coordinator. He was in regular communication with the various community and organizational leaders and acted as my conduit to identify student internship and research priorities in the community. Upon our arrival in Alta Vista in the summer, the decisions were reassessed in light of discussions with the students and community and organizational leaders.

As in previous years, the community action research and service projects undertaken in Alta Vista were administered as internships where organizational leaders supervised the students' work. Students were grouped into teams of two. They were assigned to organizational staff that provided direct oversight and facilitated coordination of project activities in the community. In addition, I served as on-site mentor and assisted the students with their field research as needed. Students were additionally encouraged to call on university faculty in their major units to get disciplinary help with their projects. Fernando also assisted with oversight and coordination of student project activities in the community, including soliciting assistance from local experts.

Implementation of the Alta Vista Study Abroad Program

The concepts of engagement interface framework can be used to draw out the characteristics and appraise scholarly engagement work in any type of context, including collaborative action research. This includes study abroad programs where community engagement pedagogy is employed to address both student and community learning goals and development outcomes. Chief among the concepts in the Fear model of community engagement is the view of scholarship of engagement as collaborative inquiry, defined earlier as ‘a process consisting of repeated episodes of reflection and action through which a group of peers strives to answer a question of importance to them’ [10]. For my purposes of reinstating the program, this definition immediately raised two operative questions: what was the question of importance and who was the group of peers striving to answer it?

As leader and organizer of the Alta Vista program, the object of my immediate work effort was to figure out the best way to plan and implement the program. As such, my interest focused on two central questions: (1) How could the program serve as a pedagogical tool and community development intervention where students could learn to apply their academic and cultural knowledge, as well as language and professional skills, in partnership with community organizations of Alta Vista? (2) How could the program implement community development projects consistent with community priorities? As to which group of peers was striving to answer these questions, it became immediately apparent that planning and deciding the best way to implement the scholarly program would be a collaborative effort. The structure of the community of practice to reinstate the community engagement study abroad program actually consisted of not one group of peers, but three, separated by function and location: my university colleagues, my El Rincon collaborators, and Fernando and his network of residents and organizations in Alta Vista.

My collaboration with these three peer groups deeply influenced my approach and helped me decide the best course of action to take in reinstating different aspects of the program. Here I elaborate on my work related to the program activities in the community of Alta Vista exclusively. It shows how elements of the engagement interface framework serve to interpret my work to reinstate the study abroad program in terms of communities of peers, collaborative participatory action research and engaged learning.

In El Rincon, where the students spent six weeks improving their Spanish and learning the Andean culture and history, arrangements were made for a local school of languages to deliver all the services to the students. In addition to providing Spanish language instruction and taking students to the different

archeological and historical sites, the school identified families where the students could live and monitored their wellbeing during their stay in El Rincon. By contrast, the Alta Vista component of the program operated under a faculty-led model, wherein I, as the program’s faculty leader, had the final say on on-site program operations. I engaged with the people of Alta Vista to help me decide the best way to implement the program’s various elements for maximum results. In addition to Fernando, Alta Vista offered an elaborate network of residents, community groups, nonprofits, and government agencies I could access for support.

Fernando was the key to penetrating the rich network of people and organizational leaders in Alta Vista to gain their trust and participation in the program. Like my collaborators in El Rincon and I, Fernando received compensation for his role as on-site coordinator. However, for Fernando the motive for accepting the responsibility of program coordinator appeared to have less to do with monetary gain and more with reciprocity. He was rendering his services on behalf of the Alta Vista Rotary Club and he saw the Alta Vista study abroad program as a community-building effort for Alta Vista, with an opportunity to focus on strengthening the social capacity of Alta Vista residents by their interactions with Americans. His coordinator responsibilities, included the following activities: identify and get nonprofit private and public sector agencies to agree to host the students; assist in identifying research projects suitable to both students and the community organizations; compensate the families with whom the students stayed for six weeks; arrange the hotel accommodations for the faculty; arrange and pay for weekly field trips; arrange welcome and farewell receptions; attend to the health and safety of both faculty and students, and; facilitate the execution of the community engagement projects.

To be sure, the instrumental intent of the program to produce tangible community development outcomes was an appealing feature of the Alta Vista program to the community. That Fernando served as president of the local Rotary Club also helped to enhance the program’s acceptance in the community. Under his leadership, the Rotary Club had been very successful as an organization, well known in the community for its health campaigns. As club president, he was readily able to access the community resources necessary to fulfill his responsibilities as the on-site coordinator of the Alta Vista program.

I maintain, however, that an equally important factor in facilitating Alta Vista community acceptance of the program was that Fernando was the voice and face of the program in Alta Vista. This mattered because Fernando held respects as a community leader. Scholars [37] have linked certain characteristics of community-building organizers to the success of community-building initiatives. I witnessed many of those identified personal attributes in Fernando. Among them were his sincerity

of commitment, relationships of trust with community residents, understanding of the community, organizing and administrative experience, and social standing in the community. Although residents and community leaders of Alta Vista associated Fernando with the local Rotary Club, I maintain it was his qualities as a human being, demonstrated by his long-term commitment to the community of Alta Vista, that enabled him to get local agencies and residents, some dealing with foreigners for the first time, to commit to participate in the program.

A second tier of the Alta Vista community of peer members included the students, host families, and NGO and public agency representatives where the students interned, as well as the intern supervisors and organizational staff who oversaw the students' work. The voices of the students were a primary driver in identifying the type of community organizations served by the program and in selecting the type of action research projects implemented. While in Alta Vista, I gathered weekly with the students to reflect on the organizations and their work, their host families, and their research projects. The dialogue was particularly useful in helping me think through what the students could accomplish in five to six weeks' time. It facilitated my understanding of the community development challenges in Alta Vista. Dialogue also enabled me to learn what problems the students were having in advancing their research projects and what types of skills future students should possess to effectively contribute to community goals.

Residents of Alta Vista, particularly those who were involved in the program, recognized the importance of the study abroad program from the start and were motivated to do their part to make the program succeed. In some cases, the host families had been host families before. They knew what to expect and looked forward to sharing their family, home and culture with American students. The NGOs that became involved with the students were the same ones that had been involved in prior years. They had been beneficiaries of previous student research and had learned to be flexible and to adapt to the service learning and research interests of the students while at the same time making their needs known. These agency and program leaders knew a great deal about the needs of the community and were a great resource to the students and to me. Given my interest in the study abroad program's sustainability, I recognized the importance of spending time with these sub-site level community leaders to nurture trust, better understand their operations, and reaffirm the instrumental intent of the program.

In addition, a network of people and organizations knew about the program and participated by welcoming the students, attending program-sponsored events, and assisting students in their research where they could. Among this group of community resources available to the program were Alta Vista Rotary Club members, local politicians, and leaders of community organizations and other more formal institutions of Alta Vista. Rotary Club

members, mostly from the business community, took pride in the program and supported the students in numerous ways. An important member of the network was the mayor of Alta Vista, who gave the students and me a welcome reception and, at the end of the program, signed proclamations in recognition of what the program had accomplished. Another member of this extended community of peers was Fidel, an alumnus from my university whom I had met when I first assumed leadership of the program. Although Fidel now lives in the United States, he spent his 2012 summer in Alta Vista, so I was able to seek his guidance.

Outcomes of the Alta Vista Study Abroad Program

What did the outcomes of collaborative inquiry, engaged learning, look like in the Alta Vista engagement interface, and what other outcomes emerged from the collaborative action research taken to reinstate the study abroad program? In responding to this question I reflect on the sequential process to reestablish the Alta Vista program, thinking of collaborative inquiry in terms of one of its principle outcomes, as engaged learning, 'best captured by the image of people engaging each other and learning together' [10].

Since its inception, the idea behind establishing the Alta Vista study abroad program was to combine the cultural, language, and research skills, as well as the interests and energy of the students with organizational resources in Alta Vista in ways that addressed the needs of the community [36]. The students participating in the study abroad program knew about the community engagement focus of the program. They welcomed the opportunity to engage with NGOs and public sector organizations to better the community of Alta Vista. The process of identifying research outreach projects and placing them in NGOs and public agencies, for example, had been undertaken with their input and in consultation with Fernando, who was in regular communication with the local agencies. The course module I taught on campus prior to the students' departure helped reinforce the concepts of participatory action research, collaborative learning, and respect for the host country and its people.

As a strong proponent of collaborator participatory action research, I brought my own academic and practical understanding in economics and community economic development to bear on the process. Because of my involvement in community economic development the last twenty years, I have long embraced this collaborative approach to my work. I found it indispensable to the community engagement work the students and I were doing in Alta Vista.

In principle, the Alta Vista program's design and, more specifically, the Alta Vista component of the program, was intended to be a collaborative effort, built on participatory principles and collective discourse between myself, Fernando, the students,

and the collaborating agencies. Although the students in the study abroad program did not arrive in Alta Vista until mid-July, the efforts to plan their program and their community outreach projects had begun much earlier, in the spring semester, when I first visited Alta Vista and spent time with Fernando and Fidel to plan the program. The ‘joint talk’ [10] between them and me over the four days I was in Alta Vista produced a joint understanding of the purpose of the program and reaffirmed our joint vision, which in principle was guided by earlier visions of the program as described above.

The Alta Vista study abroad program was predicated on what the students hoped to gain from the program as well as their service and research interests and strengths. The formal integration of student interests with community needs took the form of written research project proposals on topics of mutual interest to students and the community organizations. The students worked on their research proposals while they were still at the university, before they departed on their study abroad experience. They were in contact with Fernando via Skype early on in the program for that purpose. He met each of the students and spent time helping them understand the community and its needs. He also provided them with detailed information about the various agencies where they could intern. This information was essential in helping the students write their research proposals, which they used as a plan to guide their work in Alta Vista.

The host families, where the students stayed for six weeks, met us the day we arrived in Alta Vista. The day after, Fernando and I escorted the students to the organizations where they were to do their internships. We met the NGO personnel and the intern supervisors at each community organization and got an orientation of the organization and its facilities. We spent time discussing the students’ work responsibilities as well as their research projects and how the internship supervisors could be a resource to help the students accomplish their work.

Fernando and I met nearly every day during my stay in Alta Vista. Over that time, we engaged in ‘repeated episodes of reflection and action’ to figure out the best ways to facilitate the work of the students and deal with the daily issues that arose. We also engaged in daily dialogue about the long-term challenge of sustaining and improving the program. Our daily dialogue often transpired in the company of others, facilitating input from the students and the network of people and organizations that were part of the community of interest vested in the success of the program.

In my role as program leader, I was interested in the effective execution of the Alta Vista program and tried to be a keen observer, listener, questioner, encourager, and facilitator. My approach and system of inquiry generally involved getting answers to questions about student progress and concerns, and to situations and events that I saw in Alta Vista that could affect the program. I also

asked about the range of community development options and opportunities that the students could engage in over the long term and on a sustained basis. I also made time to visit with the host families, who took their roles and responsibilities very seriously, accommodating the students and seeing to their needs as if they were family members. For the most part students handled things on their own, often after talking things over themselves and/or with Fernando and me. The students, Fernando, and I saw each other during the week, and on Friday nights, we gathered to reflect on the week’s experience. We also took the students on weekend excursions to places nearby, so interaction with them was frequent. During our time together, I often encouraged journal writing for students to reflect on their experiences and reminded them of the norms of engagement and their role as ambassadors of the program and their university.

The host families were very welcoming and often took the students on excursions and involved them in family gatherings and public events. Only in one case did we have problems with a student’s home stay. For the most part, the service-learning intern assignments went relatively smoothly for the students during their six-week stay in Alta Vista. In the majority of cases, the service learning activities leveraged the students’ strengths. This meant students working with native students to teach them English, but they also assisted with special projects. In most cases, the community organization’s target audience helped focus the work activities, which ranged from delivering health and nutrition messages to developing lesson plans for children with special needs. Because learning English was mandatory in school, Alta Vista students and their teachers greatly valued the assistance by native English speakers.

In most instances, the students’ original research proposal served to guide their research project activities, although there were minor adjustments. My role in helping the students with their research projects was as an encourager and facilitator, but also as an educator. Most students had methodological concerns, although a couple of students needed better understanding of the problem they wanted to research. One student needed help with survey development. Another needed help in identifying clients to interview and a third needed help with the formation of focus groups. Two other students needed help with data collection, data access, and dataset development. What matters arose were mostly addressed between individual students and me, but Fernando was always a resource, especially in matters involving data solicitation from third parties.

Having a community of peers to ‘interact collaboratively and deliberatively for the purpose of creating and enacting a shared learning agenda,’ [38] is a critical element in the scholarship of engagement interpreted as collaborative inquiry. In addition to its instrumentality, an important challenge of this new scholarship is

its stance on the importance of ‘respectful engagement’ and co-ownership of the community engagement process and outcomes, where community participants, students, and I were colleagues and co-learners in a jointly defined enterprise. Although the participants were diverse, all were committed to seeing the program succeed. Fernando and I quickly became aware of the need to work collaboratively and quickly established shared norms of respect and dialogue. Each of us respected each other’s role and each appreciated each other’s unique perspective and knowledge base as well as each other’s strengths in addressing the problems that arose. A frequent topic of discussion was how best to capitalize on the strengths and interests of the students to address their learning needs while contributing to the needs of the community.

Beyond engaged learning, tangible outcomes materialized for both the students and the Alta Vista community. The service learning literature suggests that student development takes different forms, including students’ academic learning, sense of civic responsibility, and life skills [39]. Although a formal assessment of student development outcomes resulting from the study abroad program was not a formal part of the plan to reinstate the program, there is plenty of evidence to indicate growth in their understanding of Andean culture and history, linguistic abilities, efficacy, and effective citizenship. Spending twelve weeks taking Spanish classes from Peruvian professors, visiting archeological and historical sights, living with host families, and having to practice their Spanish to complete their internship assignments and action research projects were contributing factors to these student-learning outcomes. My time spent with the students in Alta Vista and my reading of their reflection essays both indicated they had a transformative experience.

Tangible development outcomes also accrued for the host families and the community, as well as the organizations involved with the program. The seven students in the program contributed at least forty hours a week apiece for five and one-half weeks in direct services to an NGO, two schools, a cooperative, and a regional hospital in Alta Vista. The students spent considerable amounts of time on their action research projects in support of organizational and community action goals. The community and organizational needs and issues researched by the students covered a variety of topics:

- Educational Programs for Special Needs Children
- Educational Programs for Working Children and Adolescents
- Nutrition Education in Primary Schools
- The Needs of Single Mothers of Young Children
- Development and Marketing of Peruvian Textile Products
- Institutional Capacity and Resource Analysis of a Regional Public Hospital

- Survey Assessment of Diseases of Miners Working in the Informal Mining Sector

Fernando, as well as my discussions with the staff of the various community organizations participating in the program also reinforced the favorable appraisal of the students by host families and by the supervisors of the students’ work. All the evidence suggests that the contributions of the students were significant and highly valued. After the program ended and I returned to the states, I received an unsolicited letter from Fernando that summarized the benefits he saw from the program. The letter, which contained Fernando’s personal assessment of the benefits of the program, is quite telling. According to Fernando, the benefits of the community engagement program accrued for four constituencies:

- ‘The benefits for the sectors (governmental and nongovernmental organizations) of the area were principally the exchange of understanding. The help provided by each student in their research project was invaluable. The teaching of English to students and teachers was a beautiful experience.
- The benefits for the host families, primarily the exchange of culture, the experience of assuming responsibility for a new son in the family, getting used to and close to the students and being deeply saddened by their departure.
- The benefits to the children, the families, were excellent, as exemplified by public demonstration of satisfaction and respect for the students in the streets and in public forums.
- Benefits to the community of Alta Vista included the exchange of culture, the assistance to arts and crafts production and marketing of textile products abroad, the teaching of English to children and youth, as well as the physical therapy for adults and children in the hospital, teaching the parents about food nutrition for their children and teaching children to eat healthy.’

Conclusion

In this paper, I engage in reflective practice and use the theory of engagement practice known as the engagement interface framework of engaged learning to examine and better understand my work to reinstate the Alta Vista study abroad program as collaborative inquiry, a collaborative and participatory form of action research. The framework has enabled me to assess my work as collaborative inquiry and has served as a useful methodological tool and standard of best practice to examine my community engagement practice.

However, the study does more than demonstrate the usefulness of collaborative inquiry as a methodological tool to examine community engagement work in context of study abroad education inform, or to inform best practices in scholarly engagement. Most

importantly, the study shows how collaborative inquiry serves as a methodological stance against neoliberal learning principles. The view of community engagement scholarship as collaborative inquiry, for example, challenges the traditional view of engagement scholarship interpreted in strictly process terms, where work is undertaken in a controlled or otherwise stable environment with those responsible in control. Engaged learning, the outcome of collaborative inquiry, also challenges the image of engagement scholarship as technical rationality, a perspective on scholarship grounded in the view of practice as a setting for the application of knowledge but not its generation. Additionally, unlike the neo-positive approaches to engaged social inquiry, collaborative inquiry gives explicit recognition to the importance of normative intent, taking into consideration such matters as ethnical comportment and cultural respectfulness, including community development priorities. As a critical research methodology, collaborative inquiry stands in sharp contrast to neoliberal principles and offers a direct challenge to the positivist methodology in the scientific paradigm that tends to subordinate democratic methods of social inquiry.

A hostile HE environment and the need to guard against such marginalization of participatory research practices may cause scholars to question collaborative methodologies or underestimate their ability to effectively challenge the neoliberal hegemony currently seen in HE. That is why it is important to take the offense and show how collaborative action research can serve to counter neoliberalism's hold on engagement practice as well as in research, teaching, and professional development. By demonstrating how collaborative inquiry can be much more than a defense against the marginalization of collaborative approaches to social inquiry, this paper illustrates its power to contest the neoliberal community engagement and research agendas in universities. Seen as critical engagement, action research as collaborative inquiry goes beyond defending engagement work. It also serves as a subversive mythological catalyst in HE to challenge neoliberal knowledge practices as well as identify, label, and promote alternatives.

Notes

All names are pseudonyms.

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