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## A Scholarly Teaching Adventure ...

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In this adventure essay, an educator takes two trips. First, she heads to the Amazon rainforest and is awestruck by her students' motivation and learning. Then, with you in tow, she embarks on a scholarly journey to discover what happened and why.

## **Keywords**

Scholarly teaching, Cultural immersion trip, Study-abroad

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## A Scholarly Teaching Adventure...

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### Abstract

In this adventure essay, an educator takes two trips. First, she heads to the Amazon rainforest and is awestruck by her students' motivation and learning. Then, with you in tow, she embarks on a scholarly journey to discover what happened and why. You are invited to scrutinize her scholarly souvenirs and begin an adventure of your own with a [Reader's Response](#) for our next issue or with participation on the [IJ-SoTL listserv](#).

### The Adventure

As the professor of a class that included a cultural immersion trip to the Amazon rainforest, I was amazed by the high levels of motivation and learning demonstrated by my undergraduate students. What bewildered me most was that those same students had been quite different in our traditional university classroom during the weeks prior to their class trip; tardiness, mediocrity, and a general lack of participation and preparation were the norm. Said one student in her opening journal entry, "My initial excitement is not about cultural adventure, but instead the fact that by taking the class and going to Ecuador, I will be able to graduate on time." That same student later wrote:

I feel I grew into a better human being on this trip, one who is better aware of the world and the good and the bad in this world. I will never be the same and I hope to continue educating myself on this amazing world we live in. I don't want to just live in this world but rather I want to experience this world.

As such educational growth was demonstrated by a majority of the students, an astute educator might simply conclude that "study abroad opportunities are good" and begin to seek funding to require them. Instead, I became curious about *why* this experience worked so well to bring lasting learning in the lives of students and *how* those conclusions might be transferable to the regular undergraduate classroom. My curiosity and astonishment were amplified by the kinds of things students experienced in this learning environment: high ambiguity, significant discomfort, frustration, anxiety, danger, and exhausting labor. In my traditional classroom I work to prevent such conditions, *assuming* that by doing so I am strategically creating an environment that fosters student learning. How could it be that in this class when such undesirable conditions were present, motivation and learning soared? I was driven to know what had happened, and that's when the real adventure began...the adventure of scholarly teaching.

### **Pre-Trip Instructions**

In this essay, I invite you to go on my trip and one of your own. As you follow my intellectual journey and scrutinize my scholarly souvenirs, open the luggage of your own assumptions and be invigorated by the ideas that emerge for research and practice. In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer encourages dialogue among us when he proclaims, "Some of us may go public with our beliefs, voicing our vision and being challenged by the response" (1998, p. 183). You are urged to respond to this essay with intersections and divergent paths from your own scholarly journey, mapping your adventures for this international teaching community in a *Reader's Response* for the next issue of IJ-SoTL, or in comments on the IJ-SoTL listserv. One final reminder as we embark: This rejuvenating quest does not require a passport, but the traveling companions of curiosity, courage, and creativity are highly recommended.

### **The Actual Trip**

My 19 undergraduate junior and senior students were U.S. Midwesterners; five men and 14 women. These students completed a three-week, three-credit regular classroom *Intercultural Communication* course as a pre-requisite to their twelve day, two-credit cultural immersion with a primitive tribe in the Amazon rainforest of Ecuador. Service learning was a significant component of the experience and the nature of that service was revealed after our arrival. The service was comprised of manual labor including cutting bamboo poles and constructing walls; using a machete to cut and bundle heavy leaves and carrying the bundles on our backs several miles; gardening medicinal plants for a shaman using primitive tools; reforestation during jungle hikes; and shifting heavy rocks in a river to create a bathing area. In addition, students participated in interviews, jewelry-making, storytelling, shaman-led rituals, soccer, music and dance sessions, meal preparation, and daily living with the native community. The high impact of this teaching and learning experience is still being proclaimed by the students long after the trip including decisions to enter the Peace Corps, pursue further service-related travel, challenge prejudicial attitudes among family members, initiate philanthropic activities for impoverished groups, and more.

### **The Scholarly Teaching Journey**

I *had* to know what had moved these students from mediocre to marvelous in their motivation. Their learning had inspired me...but to what? Certain that there was more than context at work, I awoke night after night trying to determine just what had happened, and why. A vision of teaching and learning that did not depend on airplane rides to distant destinations was my goal.

This intellectual drive to discern what had occurred led to a systematic examination of the students' journals and papers to discover self-revelations about their learning.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing that I was using these materials for new purposes, I obtained IRB permission and student consent for the process. I recorded and grouped learning "catalysts", that is, conditions and experiences that students described as contributing to new understanding or movements in their thinking. Themes emerged from the grouping of catalysts and those themes were further investigated via a post-trip (post-grade) interview with each student participant. In

those conversations, I asked students: What was the most important thing you learned in this class and how did you learn it? As I systematically searched for clues to student

learning, ultimately I dismantled my own long-held assumptions about teaching and collected scholarly souvenirs for my continuing adventures in the classroom.

### **Faulty Assumption One – Seek Clarity; Avoid Ambiguity**

As a teacher, I have answered hundreds of thousands of questions; however, as these students and I prepared for our cultural immersion experience, my routine response to inquiries was “I don’t know.” This response was not a teaching strategy on my part, but the actual pitiful truth. I had orchestrated a learning experience that involved extremely high ambiguity. Knowing that clarity is a well-respected component of effective teaching, I was uncomfortable with the ambiguity that traveling to a remote jungle location entailed. I expected that as I learned the answers to students’ questions I would regain my role as the answer-provider and the comfort of clarity would be restored for my clarity-needing students. Instead, I learned through this scholarly quest that the high ambiguity was a significant catalyst for student learning.

Students routinely included statements in their journals such as “I just wanted my questions answered” and “I just couldn’t wait to find out....” As they learned not to turn to their professor for answers, they reported increases in curiosity and motivation. Several described an anticipation of discovery that *kept them from sleeping*. “I felt and saw many wonderful things I did not expect to see,” said one student in her journal. Said another, “I liked not knowing what was next. Each day I woke up wondering, “What’s next? What’s next?” Many concluded, “We’re going to figure it out together.”

As a result of the ambiguity, students reported curiosity, independent investigation, anticipation, appreciation for novelty, and enjoyment in discovery. One student recalled her first encounter with tribe members when she couldn’t think of what to do next, remembering: “This was the entire reason we came this far - we wanted to be shocked, culture shocked that is!” Students described multiple “surprises” daily; surprises that were connected to learning. Making meaning from the unexpected became a learning task with immediate and long-term ramifications.

No one could have prepared me to see children begging for food and money. No one could have prepared me for the elderly men and women with rotten teeth and rotten skin pulling on my sleeves asking me for a few spare coins so that they could eat. I wasn’t ready to see that and I can’t get it out of my mind. I will never be the same.

Students repeatedly revealed that they learned by experiencing and discovering for themselves rather than being provided with explicit directions, predictable situations, and prescribed guidelines for the “correct” responses to what they would encounter. One student began her journal with these words:

So here I was about to go on this trip where no one would be saying, “Did you do this, or did you do that?” There was no one checking up on me and literally taking care of me. It was going to be up to me.

In the post-class interviews, one student reflected this high ambiguity theme concisely:

If the trip is to be offered again, which it should, my opinion is that although the itinerary would now be known in more detail, the students should not receive any more information than we did regarding what they would actually be doing. The ambiguity enhanced the process. It made me work harder and learn more.

### **Faulty Assumption Two – Focus on the Cognitive, Not the Affective**

The affective domain is a complicated arena to assess. Consequently, instructional objectives in higher education are typically limited to the cognitive domain of Bloom's well-known taxonomy, even though we are aware that attitudes and other emotion-related variables are connected to learning outcomes. By contrast, in the learning documented by the students in this experience, the affective domain was central. In fact, in virtually every instance, movement in cognition involved an affective catalyst. This "affective engagement" theme had three synergistic components: 1) anxiety and frustration; 2) interdependence; and 3) significance.

#### *Anxiety and Frustration*

The anxiety and frustration associated with this learning experience led many students to use "crisis" language in their journals and papers. As they described first plane rides, fear of crime, illness, bats swooping in the pitch-black darkness of the huts, poisonous spiders, transportation strikes, and shamanistic rituals, many echoed this student's declaration: "I have never felt that type of fear before in my life." In a pre-trip entry, one student vented: "Yellow fever shot? I just wanted the five credits so I could graduate! Things went from exciting to scared out of my mind!" The night of the first "bat attack" one male student described his choices, "Sleep in the rain or sleep with the bats swooping in the hut, probably getting rabies...." He remembers asking his hut-mates, "Is it too late to drop this class?"

Along with the fear came frustration:

At some points, I got irritated with our guides. I expected more from them. At the time, I felt that with them around more we could have communicated better with the tribe but I now know that it would have taken away from the adventure. The struggle to communicate with them was a learning experience and later in the trip I discovered how good it made me feel to figure out how to communicate with the villagers without a translator.

Said another journaling student, frustrated with the manual labor: "I was complaining about the work until I realized the tribe did this everyday. They are used to this work; it is normal for them. We must have looked like idiots." Recalled another student in crisis:

It was in Otavalo at the market that I really had a breakdown and just wanted to scream. It was when all of the poor older people were coming up to me and asking me for money and at one point a women touched me and I actually got angry at her for touching me. I was completely overwhelmed. All I could think of was those children at the school and it made me sick to think that this could be them someday; begging people for money to survive. It was then and still is very sickening for me to think of.

Another reported fear that gave way to bravery and accomplishment:

When we did our jungle walk and then went to the river, I took a big step. Some of us girls decided that it would be a good idea to cross a bridge that was not very sturdy. As one of us put our feet on it, you could hear it crack and as you walked across it swayed back and forth way over the river. I conquered my fear of heights that day. I will never be the same.

### *Interdependence*

In managing those challenging emotions, students generated a heightened awareness and implementation of their interdependence. When describing movement from fear and frustration to learning, every student mentioned at least one other student who “got me through this.” In addition, a significant and revelatory shift occurred in pronoun usage as students moved from “I” language in the initial journal entries to “we” and “us” pronoun usage after their immersion into village life. The “we” sometimes referenced the whole group, sometimes one classmate or a small group, and sometimes the “hut-mates.” For example,

The frustration forced us to step it up – try to communicate – how long is this bamboo pole going to be? Quitting was not an option- we were determined to connect, even though no one was there to translate for us.

Said one young woman reflecting comments of so many, “We got through this together. It was very common for us to feel disoriented. The majority of us were both physically and emotionally drained.”

Interdependent relationships became motivation to persevere as students acknowledged one another’s unique strengths. In every journal, specific abilities of classmates were spontaneously noted as critical to success and accomplishment of the course learning goals (e.g. physical strength, emotional support, translation skills, interpersonal skills with children, manual labor knowledge, soccer enthusiasm, humor, etc.). Many students directly recognized the variety of ways that classmates contributed: “We were doing our part – we were each doing what we could – it wasn’t the same as what others could do.” High expectations for self because of the interdependence and respect for classmates was expressed routinely: “I didn’t think I could go on but knew they needed me.” Said another student, “The impression we were leaving as a group mattered to me. We were representing the U.S., college students, (*our state*). I took pride in that and we gave it everything we could.”

Further evidence of interdependence interacting with anxiety and frustration to increase motivation is revealed in these student comments:

- ✓ “I tried harder when I saw Dan moving those rocks. He was working so hard.”
- ✓ “When I felt like quitting, Corey could always make me laugh.”
- ✓ “We had worked all morning and no one wanted to quit until we were done with the wall, no matter what. We were going to do it and it took all of us.”

- ✓ "I could never have survived this by myself. I can't believe what I did. I'm so proud of us."

### *Significance*

As they worked through the fear and frustration together, students reflected on their accomplishments and reported feeling that they were doing something that mattered. For many, this perception of significant contribution was a first-time or rare experience; said one, "Now that I'm home, no one can understand. This is the first time I've been a part of something like that in my life." In her final paper written after returning home, another claimed, "Before - I was jealous of War Vets in Vietnam, because they were part of something great and special - an unspoken bond - I was nobody. Now I've been part of something."

Many provided specific personal experiences that generated feelings of significance related to their learning:

Learning their music was something that eliminated the language barrier for me. Although I was very much musically disinclined at the beginning of the trip, I was persistent, and I did learn some of the songs so that I could communicate with one of the Tsachillas through music. With the help of music I was able to learn some of the tribal language and experience the power and emotions that they had for their music. I felt very accomplished when I was able to play with the tribe at the going away party...Playing for everyone at the going away party was by far one of the greatest experiences of my life and I'm so glad that it can never be taken away. I loved watching the tribe and the students dancing together, enjoying themselves through the simple music.

Indicators of significance most frequently occurred in conjunction with the emotional struggles and the interdependence. Listen to these representative student voices and hear their pride in meaningful contribution:

- ✓ "Grade? The grade didn't matter anymore. We were affecting the lives of other people, so we gave it our all. Do whatever you can, you can't mess up...that's what we told each other."
- ✓ "At first I just saw need but then I saw myself as small but at least a part of something that could contribute."
- ✓ "I am so proud of us."
- ✓ "The work was so satisfying. I didn't want it to be over."
- ✓ "We are accomplishing something."
- ✓ "Usually what we learn in class has nothing to do with helping other people or making any kind of a difference. In Ecuador I could see that what I was trying to do with my communication skills mattered. It mattered a lot."

- ✓ "I felt like I was really doing something for humanity. Instead of doing our daily routine we did something different. We helped a community that needed us."

*Faulty Assumption Three: Teacher in Role of Expert, Not in Authentic Relationship*

In comments directed to me in their journals, stories, humor, and expressions of gratitude, students reported that the professor's "authenticity" had a significant impact on their learning. Most students began their chronological journals referencing me as "Dr. \_\_\_\_\_" and by the end were calling me "Lori". When students were facing something frustrating, they began to jokingly say, "WWLCD" ("What Would Lori Carrell Do?" based on the well-known WWJD "What would Jesus Do?" phrase). Students explained in the interviews that with this phrase they were acknowledging that I was supposed to be the model, that high ambiguity existed, and that sarcastic humor was acceptable to me (and even helpful to them). Eventually, several students (temporarily!) tattooed this acronym on their backsides with a long-lasting plant dye from the jungle. Many students recalled my insistence to be the first participant in the Shamanistic rituals (to make sure all substances were safe) as an example of modeling; however, the "authentic" component that made this WWLCD phrase humorous was that I often and obviously didn't know what to do either. I was *one of* the group members (struggling with intestinal issues, afraid of poisonous spiders, working across the language barrier, attempting all the manual labor, etc.) and yet I was in the role of "model" in our interactions with tribal members. According to students, what their professor modeled most was authenticity; a real person who loves learning *attempting* to enact what she knew about the subject matter – intercultural communication.

Favorite moments reported by students related to my "authenticity" role included a nighttime screaming episode (as a reader, you should be aware that it was a GIANT jungle moth), my unique cheerleading at our legendary soccer match with the tribe ("I'll never forget Lori Carrell doing the 'gringo' cheer..."), and the many hugs in response to their tears.

On about the third day was when I felt the culture shock set in for me. It was late and I was heading to my hut when Lori Carrell, my professor, leaned over and gave me a hug. That was it, my eyes welled up with tears and I told her how badly I had needed that...

The "mom" metaphor became quite real and (surprisingly) non-offensive as I interacted with hard-working, highly-motivated students who needed emotional support.

I was missing my mom. That seemed stupid but it was true. \_\_\_\_\_ said she was a mom and she was missing her daughter. She said maybe a hug would help us both. It did. Then she said she and her daughter were going to look at the moon every night so they would know they were looking at the same moon. We tried to find the moon but it was too cloudy...great idea Lori!

Specific word choices to reference their professor's role in their learning moments included the following: cheerleader, coach, mentor, mother, model, and supporter. Notably, these are not words that have appeared in previous student evaluations of my teaching! Listen as students speak from their journals about their professor's role in this learning endeavor:

- ✓ "I enjoyed that you were approachable. It started before we left but it really hit when we were in the jungle."

- ✓ "When we went into town that first day to get food and the strike was going on, I watched Dr. Carrell. She got out of the van and looked around. Some guys started hitting on her and she got back in next to the Chief in the front seat of the van. I decided to stay where I was."
- ✓ "I will never forget Professor Carrell running out of that hut screaming. Once I knew she was OK, I thought I was going to die laughing. I will never let her forget it. She's just like the rest of us."
- ✓ "I was scared to do the steam and the cave thing with the Shaman but Professor Carrell had done it first and said it was okay. So I went. I am so glad I did. It was an indescribable experience."
- ✓ "I just needed a mom. I knew Lori was always there if I needed a hug or something."
- ✓ "Thanks Dr. Carrell for being a wonderful mentor; I feel a bond and I am grateful for being part of this adventure."
- ✓ "I could tell Lori was proud of us."
- ✓ "Watching Dr. Carrell help Liz at the final party when she couldn't go on because she was crying was really something."
- ✓ "Thank you for being so supportive. It sure helped my confidence that you didn't know their language either. We were all screwed, ya know?"
- ✓ "When you talk about 'The Big D' (diarrhea) and admit you don't know the language, people feel like they can come to you for anything they needed on the trip. That made the whole trip a whole lot easier. It actually helped me feel freer to learn."

### **Scholarly Souvenirs to Share**

Ambiguity. Anxiety. Accountability. Accomplishment. Authenticity. Should students be uncomfortable in the classroom? Is it possible to create learning challenges that require interdependence built on students' strengths? Are the assignments we provide assisting students in finding significance? As I let go of my faulty assumptions about "good teaching" my souvenirs from the adventure include specific new ideas for structuring experiential learning and new questions for research, but more dramatically, a newly invigorated vision of teaching and learning.

### **New Classroom Practices**

This investigation prompts the following suggestion for structuring academic endeavors that may be catalytic to student learning.

- Create an experiential learning challenge with high ambiguity, the need for interdependence, and the potential for significant contribution.

- Prior to the experience, discuss principles, concepts, and skills that will be useful for meeting the challenge without providing step-by-step instructions for this specific activity.
- Model the principles, concepts, and skills as a co-participant in the challenge.
- Mentor and support students through the challenge.
- Have students document their experience as it occurs (in journals, blogs, videos, etc.)

The specifics of implementing such a process in a traditional classroom will vary substantially by discipline, course objectives, and context. Creativity, commitment, and scholarly exploration are needed to structure, enact, and document this kind of learning experience. Some of you may already be doing such work, and have much to share. Others may be willing to alter existing service learning experiences and document your journey for the rest of us.

### **New Research Directions**

#### *High Ambiguity*

Creating clear instructional objectives, assignments with precise assessment rubrics, verbal explanations that do not confuse – these are typical goals of those who aim to teach with clarity. Yet in this case, my overwhelming discomfort in not being able to provide clarity

was unjustified. Yes, students were uncomfortable. Yes, students had to look elsewhere to discover needed answers. And yes, students took responsibility for their own learning!

In a recent survey of faculty at a large U.S. university (Carrell, 2005), “lack of student motivation” was declared to be the number one teaching challenge. Faculty described the following dominant student attitude: “Tell us what to do and we’ll do it” – high clarity, low motivation. Further investigation suggested that such interaction patterns in the classroom might be contributing to low expectation and grade inflation, two other of the top five reported teaching challenges.

Introducing ambiguity into the learning adventure could positively impact motivation and learning. Of course, simply “being ambiguous” about instructions or class procedures based on the results of this study would be a mistake. Investigation is needed. Initial research questions that may interest scholarly teachers include:

*In conjunction with what other classroom variables does high ambiguity contribute to learning?*

*What is the difference between ambiguity that increases student motivation and ambiguity that decreases student motivation?*

*What are the conditions under which teacher clarity reduces student motivation?*

#### *Affective Engagement*

“While I have tried numerous times to explain to my parents, family, and friends the feelings I was experiencing while playing soccer in the jungle, it is impossible

for them to completely understand what I was truly feeling...playing soccer with the natives is by far the purest thing I have ever done.”

Orchestrating learning experiences that *inspire* college students is a worthy yet daunting goal for educators. Generally, we work to reduce student frustration and discomfort, yet these students revealed that such emotions can be significant catalysts for learning. Often, group work is reviled by U.S. students, yet in this case interdependence with classmates was confirmed as a motivational force. And finally, students reported finding significance in their work, not just relevance but a feeling of actual contribution and accomplishment missing from their regular educational endeavors. Further investigation of these surprising catalysts is needed for those of us striving to change classroom processes that may be reinforcing apathy in our students and perhaps in ourselves. Consider investigating these questions:

*What is the difference between learning-related frustration that increases student motivation and learning-related frustration that decreases student motivation?*

*How can collaborative learning experiences be structured to generate interdependence based on students' individual strengths?*

*How can learning experiences with student-perceived significance be constructed in traditional classrooms?*

*What factors prevent teachers from incorporating frustration, interdependence, and significance into their pedagogical strategies?*

*How do teacher and student emotions interact to affect learning (e.g. passion for the topic, anxiety, frustration, pride, etc.)?*

### *Teacher Authenticity*

While authenticity may be seen as an intense version of “immediacy” or “self-disclosure,” some distinctions are worthy of further dissection. First, immediacy is generally described as verbal or nonverbal displays of approachability or closeness (Cheseboro & McCrosky, 2002) whereas authenticity requires that I not just look or sound approachable but that I *foster and maintain relationships* after approaches are made. In fact, I may need to do the approaching myself, taking initiative for relationship formation. Second, the self-disclosure imbedded in authenticity is not a deliberate disclosure of a personal anecdote during a class lecture but rather a *spontaneous openness* in the presence of students. Third, the students' description of me as supporter (mother, cheerleader, and mentor) was an authentic *response* to their positive behaviors rather than a static characteristic of my teaching in other contexts.

Though highly immediate and generally nurturing, I admit to being frequently irritated by low-motivation, low-performance students. Transferring authenticity to the regular classroom will not only require changes in me but also in my students; for example, it would not be “authentic” to “act” proud of student work that is mediocre. Finally, since Pogue and AhYun (2006) concluded that students experience more affective learning and motivation with highly immediate, highly credible teachers, the *inclusion of credibility* in investigations of student perceived teacher authenticity is also recommended. In our thinking about

authenticity and credibility, we are reminded by Parker Palmer (1998) that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). You are invited to explore the following questions related to teacher authenticity:

*How do students describe and discern teacher authenticity in a traditional classroom environment? How does this description intersect with student perceived teacher immediacy and teacher credibility?*

*How does the level of displayed student motivation and quality of student work affect teacher self-disclosure and immediacy?*

*Under what student and classroom conditions can an educator serve as mentor or coach?*

*How can teachers structure classroom experiences so that their modeling contributes to student learning?*

*In a traditional classroom context, does teacher participation in a learning endeavor positively or negatively impact student learning?*

*Does authenticity diminish teacher credibility (or colleague perceptions of professionalism) even while positively impacting student learning?*

*Can “authentic” teaching be taught to future teachers and/or graduate teaching assistants?*

### **Planning Future Adventures**

Learning about teaching from student learning is indeed an adventure. This scholarly journey has led to some provocative destinations that urge me like a magnetic force to continue the exploration. I invite you to join the team of scholarly explorers, sharing your SoTL work generated in response to this essay.

To aid our quest, I turn again to a student who literally and metaphorically chronicled in her journal, “We had to use flashlights to find our way through this new and strange environment.” High ambiguity? Purposeful frustration? Assignments that make an actual difference in the world? The flashlight of scholarly inquiry is needed as we seek to discover how to maximize the transformative power of teaching and learning.

<sup>1</sup> Students' spelling and most grammatical errors have been corrected prior to quotation in this document.

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