Bridging Identity, Culture and Nation: Applying Freire to Study Abroad in Ghana

Criando Pontes entre Identidade, Cultura e Nação: O Uso de Freire no Intercâmbio Estudantil em Gana

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ABSTRACT
This essay shows how Paulo Freire's pedagogy has informed a long-running, immersive annual excursion of the USA University of Oregon journalism and communication students to Ghana, West Africa. The students are diverse in many ways: by economic class, racioethnic identity, gender, sexuality, disability, and cultural background. They are doubly challenged to live together and to work in separate internships in an unfamiliar cultural environment alongside Ghanaians, while also completing assignments and meeting program learning outcomes. Freire's concepts and methods sought to break down barriers between teachers and students and empower all participants while engaging in literacy training.
Keywords: Identity, culture, Paulo Freire, Ghana, student excursion

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RESUMO
Este ensaio mostra como a pedagogia de Paulo Freire tem informado um intercâmbio anual imersivo e de longa duração de estudantes de jornalismo e comunicação da Universidade de Oregon, EUA, em Gana, África Ocidental. Os alunos são diversos por classe econômica, identidade racial e étnica, gênero, sexualidade, deficiência e formação cultural. Eles são duplamente desafiados a viver juntos e a trabalhar em diferentes estágios em um ambiente cultural desconhecido, ao lado de ganeses, enquanto completam tarefas e atingem resultados de aprendizagem do programa. Os conceitos e métodos de Freire buscam quebrar barreiras entre professores e alunos, e capacitar todos os participantes ao mesmo tempo que os engajam na formação educativa.
Palavras-chave: Identidade, cultura, Paulo Freire, Gana, intercâmbio estudantil

INTRODUCTION

I N ALL ACADEMIC fields there has been an increased and necessary emphasis on global interrelations. Geopolitical events of the past several decades (notably the 9/11 terrorist attacks), transnational globalization, climate change, and recently the Covid-19 pandemic have exposed our global interdependence as well as disparities in accessing vital resources. Also, within many nations there have been calls to diversify organizations, including colleges and universities. Within the United Studies, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and related movements have added urgency to address enduring racial, ethnic and other forms of injustice. The rise of xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies show the inseparable connection between domestic and international prejudice and oppression, yet also have sometimes pitted domestic BIPOC (biracial, indigenous, people of color) concerns against those of new citizens and non-citizens, further complicating social justice movements.

It is within this complex context that experiential learning programs, immersing students in an unfamiliar culture and deploying Paulo Freire's insights and pedagogies, can be effective, even transformative, in shaping students' short- and long-term actions and choices. This essay therefore theorizes and illustrates how Freire's concepts apply in a two-decades long study abroad program that brings University of Oregon (UO) students to Ghana. The students are diverse and must work as a team, yet they must also collaborate with Ghanaians in professional media settings.

In this essay, I first summarize the elements of Freire's pedagogy that are foundational to this program, followed by an overview of the program. Then I give examples showing the evolution of student and instructor growth in three, overlapping thematic areas: economic class and power (e.g., the power to travel and to represent); identity and experience (e.g., by gender, race and disability); and culture (navigating differences in media norms and religion).

FREIRE'S PEDAGOGY

The UO's Media in Ghana program is grounded in concepts of experiential learning and critical pedagogy explicated by Paulo Freire in his many publications, especially his signature book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In his work with adult literacy students in 1960s Brazil, Freire sought to break down sharp identity and cultural barriers between teachers and students and empower all participants while simultaneously engaging in literacy training; therefore,

they are highly pertinent to a program such as Media in Ghana. Freirean concepts foundational to the program include: the relationality of oppression; historicity; praxis; a rejection of banking education in favor of problem-posing education; dialogue; and a goal of empowerment.

Drawing on Christian liberation theology, e.g., Teilhard de Chardin[1], Freire (1970) assumed that freedom from internal and external forms of oppression is a defining quality of human life and necessary for growth. From Marx, Lenin and others, he viewed poverty due to class structures sustained by capitalism as a central form of oppression. He also argued that oppressors are as oppressed as their victims because their acts of control are dehumanizing to all involved.

However, freedom from oppression is not a given and requires struggle and commitment.

Freire (1970) conceptualizes the practice of freedom as *praxis*, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 36). This may be accomplished via emancipatory dialogue, requiring love, humility, empathy, and hope (Suzina & Tufte, 2020). Praxis is limited by historic context or historicity, i.e., the ways in which history and culture dialectically have shaped humans while at the same time humans are shaping history and culture for the future. Historic constraints on praxis vary; therefore learners evolve differently via struggle (Freire, 1974, pp. 4-5).

Freire (1970) further argues that praxis is not possible via traditional forms of "banking education," where an instructor provides content for students to retain. He argues that banking education is a form of domination that submerges consciousness, inhibiting creative power (pp. 67-68)[2]. He favors "problem-posing education", in which teachers and students are "critical co-investigators in dialogue," and are willing to reconsider prior views as they reflect on the perspectives of others (p. 70). Problem posing methodologies include participant observation by educators; defining problems in the languages of students; analyzing the causes of problems, finding new words and images to understand them; modeling risk-taking behaviors; eliciting insights for solutions and actions; and critical reflection and growth (Freire, 1974, 1998).

Freire's (1974) goal is *conscientização*, i.e., "the development of the awakening of critical consciousness" (p. 15). As participants awaken, their silence and inaction are replaced by "critical transitivity", which is characterized by increased depth in analyzing problems, the practice of dialogue versus polemics, an openness to different viewpoints, a refusal to transfer responsibility, a rejection of passive solutions, and the ability to see validity in the approaches of others (p. 15).

[1] For the philosophical and theological underpinnings of Freire's thought, see Thomas (1994) and Melkote and Steeves (2015).

[2] John Dewey (1944) likewise worked against traditional forms of education, which he termed "pouring in" (p. 38).

Since Freire outlined these concepts and methods, numerous scholars and teachers have used them to deploy pedagogies that are *participatory*, *fully collaborative*, *engaged*, *critical*, *empowering*, and *community based* (see Giroux, 1988; hooks, 1994; Kolb, 1984; Shor, 1992). Also Freirean thought has informed others leading immersive excursions, particularly those that provide opportunities for service learning or volunteerism[3].

In a helpful application to development communication practice, but equally relevant to educational programs such as study abroad, Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009) define four levels of participation: passive participation, i.e., merely informing recipients of decisions; participation by consultation, soliciting periodic feedback with no commitment to act on it; participation by collaboration, which includes horizontal communication components, giving primary stakeholders opportunities for input via discussion and analysis; and empowerment participation, with dialogue during all phases of the process, from planning to evaluation, such that all stakeholders have significant voice (pp. 6-7). Empowerment participation is consistent with Freire's beliefs. I find these levels useful in reflecting on Media in Ghana in subsequent sections.

MEDIA IN GHANA

The program is set in Ghana, West Africa. Ghana's political stability, emerging economy, vibrant media presence, scholarly expertise at the University of Ghana and other colleges and universities, and widespread use of English as the national language makes it an attractive study abroad site for U.S. media and journalism students. Ghana's role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement adds interest, especially for BIPOC students. Ghana also remains a developing country with logistical barriers, resource limitations, and cultural differences that provide a challenging and rewarding context for learning. Media in Ghana began in 1999, and the program has continued to the present time[4].

The program has evolved over the years as an outcome of student feedback, instructor experience, and increased demand, though some features have remained constant. Applicants are screened via essays, reference checks, conduct records and interviews. Some knowledge of Ghana (showing initiative), enthusiasm, a flexible attitude, maturity, and adequate skills for a media internship are all considered.

Students live together in one house, though each departs daily for an individually assigned internship. The students also take a course that begins

[3] The *Journal of Experiential Education* offers numerous case studies of experiential fieldtrips that likewise draw on Freire.

[4] See Steeves (2006) for a detailed history.

the spring before departure. While readings on Ghana's history, culture, politics and media are assigned and the students are taught basic phrases in the most widespread local language (Asante Twi), an important goal is simply to get acquainted. Here, Freire's notion of historicity is important in recognizing that each student and instructor will begin in a different place and progress differently. Dialogic strategies to reduce gaps between and among instructors and students are important, as the onsite learning experience will be collaborative, requiring a foundation of trust.

During our first week in Ghana's capitol Accra, we continue the orientation course via group discussions, as well as meetings with Ghanaian media scholars and professionals. We also take local excursions. Internships begin the second week of the program and extend for five weeks full-time, with weekend field trips outside Accra. Students must keep a daily *media log*, recording their communication-related observations both inside and outside their internships. They also must write a paper using primary sources, i.e., interviews with Ghanaians. These assignments require critical observation and reflection, as theorized by Freire. Once onsite, problem-posing strategies per Freire are essential, in that students find themselves in an unfamiliar setting with tasks to do, and therefore need to comprehend, i.e., *problematize* their new realities before identifying solutions (Goulet, 1974, p. ix).

A significant way in which the program has evolved is in the number and diversity of students participating. In the early years and with few financial aid options, groups were small (nine or fewer) and students were almost entirely white, female, and from well-resourced class backgrounds. Even then, it became evident that the group dynamic was a significant part of the trip, and students who wouldn't ordinarily be friends developed deep bonds that have endured. As time went on, scholarships materialized, and applications increased, I began forming larger (15-20) and more diverse groups – by gender, age, sexuality, racioethnic identity, class, disability and more, requiring students to grapple with everyday hierarchies of oppression within as well as outside the group. Evidence of suitability for the trip – flexible attitude, enthusiasm, maturity – remained essential. However, as early applicants always have been considered on a first come, first serve basis and as most apply at the deadline, it isn't difficult to consider diversity while being fair to all applicants. This has since enriched everyone's experience, as we are doubly immersed in unfamiliar culture and with diverse teammates too. Additionally, I have sought funding to include colleagues as co-instructors/participants, with an emphasis on those from underrepresented backgrounds.

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In 2011, a colleague created a program blog, and students are required to post on it periodically[5]. The blog offers a space for sharing experiences and showcasing work. At the same time, peer and reader feedback on posts has facilitated dialogue in exposing differences. The rise of social media and students' posts on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have provided further opportunities. In addition, for several years, between 2015 and 2019, the students formed teams to create assets for local non-profit groups. Students with lower-demand internships thereby had another way to engage with Ghanaians and secure portfolio material, and everyone had another avenue to learn and contribute, as time allowed[6].

Another change is in program learning outcomes. Some are preset on the required syllabus in what may appear to be a top-down manner, as in Tufte and Mefalopulos' (2009) lowest level of passive participation. However, in fact, the learning outcomes have evolved over the years in response to feedback via consultative participation[7]. More significantly, the way in which learning outcomes are assessed varies by participant and group context. The most important learning outcomes are unlisted, i.e., those related to heightened consciousness and growth. Students generally come to the program seeking personal growth, and they write and visualize about their personal insights during and after the program. Freire's goal of *conscientização*, i.e., requiring self-reflexive awareness of difference and privilege is paramount. My hope is that students depart with an enhanced consciousness of human relationships and commonalities, a sense of growth, an appreciation for different worldviews, and a commitment to act against injustice.

Next I discuss examples of how Freire's concepts apply in this program and have led to insights and actions in three related areas of difference: class, identity, and culture.

CLASS AND POWER

The UO students and instructors have the power of class and nation to travel and experience Ghana, whereas few Ghanaians will ever have such an opportunity. We therefore are challenged to understand our political economic privilege while also learning to better appreciate the complexity of Ghana, and to read and make narratives and images that resist simplistic and inaccurate representations.

Despite readily available information on the program, many students are motivated to apply based on images of Africa as a poverty-stricken continent in need of saving. Commonly applicants write about selecting

Ghana over a European site in part because of a desire to *help*. Dialogue to move their mindset from helping to listening, learning and valuing human relations begins in the initial interview, extending throughout the program in spring classes and onsite. Useful resources include Adichie's (2009), "The Danger of the Single Story", Wainaina's (1992) satiric essay, "How to Write about Africa", and current examples of misrepresentations such as CNN's "Troubled Waters", a story about supposed child slavery in Ghana's fishing industry that shows how the enduring Africa-as-victim trope sustains a journalist-NGO nexus whereby journalists get locally sourced stories and NGOs get exposure and revenue (Amenuti, 2019).

Once onsite, and following orientation, students have a heightened consciousness about representation. They want to emphasize positive stories and provide context for negative stories. However, they quickly learn that even positive representations may not overcome hegemonic readings. As an example, in 2013 a newly arrived student posted a photo on Facebook of himself with some neighborhood children with the innocent caption: "Made some new friends in Ghana". His brother reposted it with a new caption: "My older brother is in Ghana saving the kids"[8]. The incident sparked subsequent conversations about the ethics of representation and the recognition that even the most well-contextualized stories will never be perfect, and audience readings cannot be fully controlled. Plus we are all on the learning curve, and must allow ourselves to make mistakes and move on.

[8] See Madison and Steeves (2014, p. 218).

Regarding class consciousness, students move into a shared house in one of Accra's wealthier neighborhoods; however, in part to reduce program cost, the house lacks air conditioning, hot water, strong water pressure, and wifi. They grumble at first about the minor discomfort and inconvenience, but then they are immediately struck by the extreme economic divide in Ghana that they observe: first, from an air-conditioned bus touring greater Accra, and later in their daily activities. Students know that poverty exists in the U.S., but most can choose not to see it. Not so in Ghana, where wealth and poverty are evident daily, and students are forced to grapple with the anxiety that these routine encounters evoke.

Catherine's reaction following the tour of Accra shortly after arrival is typical:

The excursion felt dangerously close to disaster tourism. That was not the intent of the drive-by visit, though, and I'm glad we didn't stick only to the postcard-worthy sights. Poverty is ugly, but pretending it doesn't exist won't put clean water in children's cups or sewer systems in poor communities. Knowing that kids are burning our discarded computers for their precious metals, that families

have to bathe in the street for lack of space, that waterways are clogged with plastic baggies and human waste – just a few minutes' drive away from where we sleep – humbles me. I hope the day makes us appreciate what we have, low water pressure and all. (Gregory, 2011a, para. 5)

As time goes on, they continue to reflect on these extremes. In a later post, Catherine wrote about visiting a school in a deprived community, the staff's generosity in preparing her a meal, her failed attempt to eat it, her revulsion at the condition of the washroom, and her reflections after:

I struggled to identify and address a mishmash of feelings: guilt for wasting an entire meal at the school, relief upon escaping the open gutters of Nima, distaste for the consumerist tourist mecca of Osu, anger at my own privilege and delicate sensibilities.

In Accra, I'm constantly grasping for some sort of balance. My days are never "fine;" they're always a mix of really good and really bad. I ping pong between emotions, swing from contentment to physical discomfort and navigate my way between abject poverty and opulence. This is a land of contrasts, and my internal state mirrors its tumult. (Gregory, 2011b, paras. 11-12)

Eventually, the students begin to discuss previously unrecognized or ignored inequalities at home, as Emily wrote:

Poor Ghanaians are dying from lack of sanitation, but so are Americans. . . .

Across the United States, poor people and minorities are more likely to suffer from environmental degradation, pollution, and poor health. . . .

The divide between rich and poor is far from just an African problem. Perhaps wealthy Americans find the reality easier to ignore – we collect amongst each other, in neighborhoods and work and social circles, and tell ourselves that real poverty is far away. In Ghana it stares you in the face. But the reality of the situation is worldwide and growing: unless we change, and fast, much of this earth will become unlivable. At that point, our gates will not help us much. (Topping, 2019, paras. 9, 11, 15)

In their internships, students struggle with resource constraints. Even though preparatory sessions covered these matters, the limitations are challenging. Students must navigate heavy traffic on public transportation (packed minivans called *trotros*) to reach their internship sites[9]. Compared to early years of the program, smart phones now are ubiquitous and wifi

[9] For an excellent visualization of a typical student workday, see Higdon's (2016) short video.

is widely accessible; however, internet data is expensive and not all sites offer access. Air conditioning isn't always available and electrical power is unstable. Some sites lack sanitary washroom facilities or proximity to food, so students must figure out how to meet basic needs and stay healthy. Plus, the logistics of everyday work tasks can be frustrating (see, e.g, O'Leary, 2019a). As time goes on, most develop a new respect for Ghanaian media workers and how much they are able to accomplish with comparatively little. Students also are humbled by the immense gratitude and generosity of their supervisors and colleagues, even after just a few weeks. Ben, for instance, expressed his great surprise at the end of the program when advertising agency co-workers treated him and a peer intern to lunch, then took them to a clothing boutique to select Ghanaian outfits (Neal, 2016).

In 2013, our students experienced a particularly traumatic event, one that profoundly changed them – and me as instructor too. One pre-dawn morning when the students were still sleeping (security had dozed off too), robbers entered their home and stole numerous laptops, iphones, cameras, and wallets. We spent the day taking inventory, filing reports, and commiserating. Later I left briefly for other business. When I returned, the students had gathered in a circle. One suggested that they go around and each name something to be grateful for. They expressed gratitude for each other and for the experience of Ghana. They also recognized that this moment would pass and they would one day be able to replace their gadgets, an option most Ghanaians could never have. As a group, they discussed whether and how to report and frame the robbery in their internships and on social media. All comments were moving, and there were tears. I anticipated anger and threats of lawsuits, but their reactions were quite the opposite, revealing profound empathy and recognizing the learning opportunity of the moment. The students' gratitude only increased as Ghanaian neighbors and co-workers offered support and apologized for their country. Carson lost his iphone, laptop, all photos and his entire master's thesis. He wrote:

> My connection to my world, my home, and my people had been cut. I felt paralyzed, and it wasn't because of the devices monetary value, it was because of everything of mine they represented and possessed. Then over the next few days, I began to see things for the first time. I recognized moments that previously had passed without notice and identified things that you can't see if you aren't really looking. I learned things about life that would have been lost upon me if my life had not been stolen. When you start looking for the evil and all you find is the good, a country full of people eager to help, smile, and say hi to strangers, you learn about the

human spirit. . . . When you go to work and the office queues to apologize on behalf of their country, all speaking in the first person as if they had robbed you, you learn about the human spirit. When the other students on this adventure, who have all had pieces of their life stolen, sit in the living room and together refuse to let it define this life changing experience, you learn about the human spirit. When that same group becomes closer and smiles more, you learn about the human spirit. Without being robbed and losing a lot of physical property, I may have never learned what I came here to try and understand. I would have never gained real insights into what it means to be human and what is really important within the human experience. (York, 2013, paras. 3-4)[10]

[10]Numerous students wrote similarly. See, e.g., Armor (2013).

GENDER, RACE, AND INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY

As noted above, Freire's (1998) analysis of oppression centralized class analysis, usually defining oppressors and oppressed as material *haves* and *have nots*. However, some of his writings do additionally, though briefly, reference other axes of oppression. "The authoritarian, filled with sexual, racial, and class prejudices, can never become tolerant without first overcoming his or her prejudices" (p. 42).

What can be said, for example, of a man considered to be progressive who, in spite of his talk in favor of the lower classes, behaves like the lord over his family, whose domineering suffocates his wife and children? What can be said of the woman who fights for the interests of those of her gender but who at home rarely thanks the cook for the cup of water? (Freire, 1998, p. 67)

Numerous scholars since Freire have sought to further extend his concepts beyond class. Stromquist (2014), hooks (1993, 1994), Melkote and Steeves (2015) and others argue that his pedagogies are relevant to patriarchal ideologies, which remain evident globally. Others (e.g., Custódio & Gathuo, 2020) have applied Freire to ideologies of racism as well as sexism.

As inequalities are inseparable and layered, I favor merging his work with intersectionality, which argues that oppression is rarely a binary and can only be understood in the context of many social intersections and constraints. Although Crenshaw (1991) is often credited with the concept, others made similar arguments earlier, including emerging LGBT feminists, Black feminists, African feminists and others. Frye (1983), for instance, used the metaphor of a bird cage to explain oppression: "The bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance

to its flight, but which, but their relations to each other, as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon" (p. 2).

Furthermore, and especially in the context of the Global South, political economy (per Freire) and postcolonial theory are important lenses because they require paying attention to geopolitical capitalist structures sustained by divides between wealthy and poor nations and classes within nations. Socialist feminism is helpful too in synthesizing Marxism and feminism, showing how men's control over women's labor is a feature of most societies, evident in women's concentration in lower-paying positions, in inadequate childcare and parental leave support, and in many other ways. In the context of developing countries, class compounded by neocolonial economic structures constitutes an especially salient strand of the bird cage that constrains girls and women. One percent of the world's people own almost all of the world's wealth and 90 percent of the world's millionaires are men (Berti, 2018; Credit Suisse, 2019).

Yang (2016) powerfully illustrates the application of Freire's dialogic pedagogies, including study circles, as well as feminist, anti-racist and decolonizing pedagogies via an intersectional lens in adult *folk high schools* in Sweden[11]. These schools, originally set up for adults without access to public schools, blend participants from varied identity backgrounds and at different levels of consciousness, much like Media in Ghana. Yang's study focused on the Women's Room, a women-only, feminist-identified folk high school for migrants in Sweden. According to Yang, "The positionality of migrant individuals and their teachers reveals the intersected social categories and power at work in the process of othering" (p. 837).

Gender and sexuality constitute an ongoing point of discussion before and during the Media in Ghana trip, especially as the #MeToo movement has gained ascendancy in much of the Global North, lesbian and gay rights have been normalized, and non-binary gender has been increasingly accepted. In Ghana, there tends to be less public consciousness around sexual harassment. Homosexuality is widely taboo and same-sex relationships are criminalized (though legal action is uncommon). Non-binary and transgender conversations are not as evolved as in much of the Global North. We discuss these issues extensively, as our students need to be safe in Ghana, while at the same time accept that they are guests with much to learn. We also discuss relevant historic context, such as the impact of colonization on gender roles (e.g., Oyěwùmí, 1997), and we review strategies for handling common situations and when and how to push back or request assistance.

[11] Rasmussen (2013) discusses the history and pedagogy of *folks schools* in Denmark.

Our women students especially are in numerous uncomfortable situations, enduring marriage proposals, invitations on dates and frequent comments about their personal appearance that would certainly be considered borderline harassment in the U.S. and occasionally do cross a line. Students generally have been able to navigate these situations well, sometimes with assistance, and have had conversations with Ghanaians that have been mutually illuminating. Emily wrote about her experience at the TV station where she interned:

> men would tell me I'm beautiful, that they want to take me home or to marry me. . . . I often found myself making it into a joke. . . . At no point did I feel endangered, but it was awkward and uncomfortable.
> However looking back now, it was truly a learning experience. Do I wish it didn't happen? Yes of course I do because no woman should ever be treated that way. But by these experiences I was able to get a little taste of how a lot of women are treated around the world. (Port, 2018, paras. 1-2)

Importantly, most of the students begin to recognize that gender roles are complex everywhere. In 2016 Rachel attended an African Union event where Ghana received a gender award recognizing leadership in promoting women's economic and social rights. She later wrote:

> Ultimately, life in Ghana has shown me that the progress of feminism does not follow a single, prescribed path. Women in a society can have representation without respect, or respect with immutable cultural limits. A society can embrace women in the workplace, yet refuse to acknowledge any long-term change in gender roles. Nothing in a fight for social justice is as simple as "forward" or "backward." In different cultural contexts, the battles and victories are not the same. Thanks to this international experience, I'll carry that understanding with me as I continue to study and advocate for women's issues. (Benner, 2016a, para. 10)

Difficult situations also arise around sexuality. In 2015 most of the students found themselves coping with the ways that religious fundamentalism affects reporting, especially with a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage. On her first day in her internship Erin was assigned a story on Ghanaian and U.S. reactions to the ruling. Her editor directed her to use his evangelical Christian text messages as sources, creating great inner turmoil, as she recounted in her blog post (Hampton, 2015). In her internship report Erin later wrote:

Nevertheless, I used the messages, along with several quotes from American news sources about the mixed reactions to the Supreme Court ruling, attempting to be as unbiased as I possibly could. . . . I felt I had done a fairly good job. . . . However, when I saw the article on the front page the next day, my heart sank. The headline read: "Gayism is insult to Creator's intelligence, Ghanaians declare".

While the headline was hardly representative and would never be approved in a credible U.S. publication, Erin was still proud that that she was able to navigate the situation so the story equally included her sources. It also sparked many frank and mutually consciousness-raising conversations with her co-workers on this topic.

Race constitutes an especially challenging identity issue for American visitors to Ghana in the context of anti-racism activism and the BLM movement. Custódio and Gathuo (2020) foregrounds anti-racist and anti-colonial activism in his case study of the Finland-based Anti-Racism Media Activist Alliance (ARMA), which combines media activism with Freirean dialogue to raise consciousness:

As members of the university community in Europe, we have been on the privileged side of the spectrum in cultural and economic terms. In that sense, Freire's original understanding of being oppressed in terms of class has not applied to us. Despite that, it was only after accessing media materials and experiencing dialogue with peers already engaged in anti-racism struggles that we realized how racism has affected us and how the suffering of peers also concerns our existence. (p. 140)

Anti-racism constitutes an enduring theme in our program. Ghana was centrally situated in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Around 80 historic forts and castles stand along Ghana's coast, and many were used to brutally hold captured slaves for weeks or months before being shipped to the Americas. Additionally, Ghana's independence in 1957, coinciding with the U.S. Civil Rights movement, plus Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah's friendship with U.S. Civil Rights leaders, led to numerous high profile visitors, including W. E. B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, and others. Since then, Ghana has increasingly attracted African Americans seeking to learn about their heritage. Ghana declared 2019 the *Year of Return*, marking 400 years since the first slaves arrived in North America. This history also helps draw students and faculty of color to the program.

Diverse groups mean varying consciousness around race, ethnicity, and other intersections. Once onsite, students struggle with their feelings about being publicly labeled *obruni* or *oburoni*, a common term meaning

white person, but also used to reference any foreigner. The term is not meant to offend, but students are uncomfortable being called out in this way. White students often try to connect their discomfort to the U.S. minority experience, but eventually and in conversation, realize that it's a false equivalence, as Rachel wrote:

> "Now I know what it feels like to be a minority." As a white person in Ghana, this is easy to say. I stand out. I'm asked where I'm from. I'm constantly conscious of my race, and it's hard.
> But this statement isn't true. Especially in light of the recent horrific police shootings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, along with the other forms of racial violence that occur in the U.S. every day, I have to acknowledge that I will never truly know how it feels to be oppressed and disenfranchised on account of my race.
> As a "minority" here, I do not experience implicit bias in hiring processes, or feel that people subconsciously link me with crime and violence. I never fear for my life in the presence of police. On the contrary, there is at times an odd respect for white foreigners woven into Ghanaian hospitality. For example, I am interning at a premier radio station in the nation's capital city… with no previous radio experience. My privilege is hard at work. (Benner, 2016b, paras. 4-6)

At the same time, African American and other students of color are disappointed that they, too, are considered obrunis, even during the 2019 Year of Return. As Mercedes wrote,

> We were Obrunis (foreigners), but we were still not created equal. I didn't look like my peers. . . . I don't fit the mold that Ghanaians have for the "all-American girl," so I faded to the background in a lot of social settings. In a place where I thought I would be welcomed, I felt like a stranger. (Wright, 2019, para. 12)

The excursions to two prominent former slave-trading castles always evoke powerful emotions – of guilt, anger, extreme sadness, confusion and even despair. Students of color and especially African American students often find these excursions exceedingly painful; but their experiences are not uniform and it is important to find ways to let everyone express themselves without judgment. Juwan, an African American student, had been well educated on the slave trade, yet found himself overcome by the tour, struggling to grasp how such a massive crime against humanity could be perpetuated for so long:

> I want to hate white people. . . . but then you can't really get mad at them, because it's so much bigger than that. . . . if the African people hadn't partook in it, it wouldn't have got that big. . . . I can't get mad at my own people. . . . I'm just mad at the situation . . . there were so many hands playing into it. (University of Oregon, 2013, 3:12[12])

Varying emotions also can easily be read as disrespect and lacking empathy. Mercedes, quoted previously, wrote about her feelings and her peers following the Elmina Castle tour:

[12]Video produced by Ed Madison (University of Oregon, 2013) featuring Juwan's and other students' reactions following the castle tour.

> I couldn't speak during the tour. I couldn't think. There was a pain deep inside my heart that I couldn't explain. I was angry. I was hurt. I didn't want to be there. I boarded the bus in silence, where life seemed to resume for my peers. They were laughing and joking as if everything could go back to normal. For me, nothing would ever be the same. (Wright, 2019, paras. 2-3)

Later, in our discussion, Mercedes was able to share her anger and pain with the larger group in a way that was raw and real and immediately changed the tone of the conversation. Donny, a white student, tried to capture his sense of inadequacy guilt, shame, recognition of privilege, and feeling of helplessness in the moment.

> It's hard to put into words the atrocities that happened at Elmina Castle. As a writer, my words and the words of others are sometimes all I have. But today, they feel cheap and trivial. . . .
> I can also tell you about my selfishness. About my inability to comprehend the mass amounts of pain surrounding me. About the barrage of trivial thoughts concerning my girlfriend back home, about my internship and my cat. For me, the privilege existed in my inability to remain present. To imagine a sea of faces perishing at the hands of colonizers is easier than imagining just one. Because if there's only one, there's a chance I might recognize it.
> Yes, I can tell you about all of this, the words tasting flat and diluted on my tongue. I can tell you how uncomfortable I am writing this now. How the idea of me using this experience as a tool for personal growth feels both empowering and utterly defeating at the same time. (Morrison, 2019a, paras. 6, 12-13)

Another white student in the same group, Madeline, reflected similarly, but additionally on gender intersectionality, and on the imperative to act.

> As a woman, I imagined myself here at the will of a foreign predator and tried to comprehend the fear, despair, and anger that millions of women felt here every day for 400 hundred years. It was easier for me to try and sympathize with these women than face the fact that, on the rare occasion that a white woman were to enter this castle, that they would not be standing down here in the courtyard, but up above. . . .

> The day of our trip to Elmina was uncomfortable. Not just because of the heat or the stench, but because I was forced to face my privilege in a way that I never had before. I have not only white privilege, which has a whole new meaning to me now, but the privilege to visit this castle and experience this myself, and the privilege that no one who ever lived here did: knowing that it ends. . . . And all of this pain and growth means nothing if we do not act to make sure that history does not repeat itself. (Robinson, 2019, paras. 7, 12)

Whenever powerful emotions are involved, there are dangers in having a discussion circle. As Machado and Freire (1998) note, there may be elements of group therapy in the dialogic method that act to assuage the guilt of the oppressor and/or make the oppressed feel better about their victimization (p. xiv). It is important to stay firmly focused on the political project or praxis of resisting injustice. There is always the risk that words will unintentionally divide the group and negatively affect the dynamic beyond one discussion and even permanently. Words can also have a harmful triggering impact on particular individuals. Having a strong group bond in advance is crucial. Having a maximally diverse group for mutual support helps, as does inviting diverse colleagues (for this particular trip, African Americans and Ghanaians), who can serve as discussion leaders and initiate and model verbalizing complex and difficult feelings. As Freire (1998) recommends for instructors: "The best is to tell the learners, in a demonstration of being human and limited, how one feels at the time" (p. 48). No matter what, the risk is real, and we as instructors need the wisdom to know that risks mean mistakes and the humility to admit them and keep seeking ways to improve.

Finally, space does not allow, but numerous students with disabilities have participated in Media in Ghana, and all have contributed significantly. Particularly memorable is Anais (Annie) Keenon, who is profoundly hearing impaired[13]. Thanks to Annie's assertiveness, we all learned to include her in conversations – e.g., by ensuring that she was within eyesight of speakers and/or by having someone nearer repeat comments. Because the radio is the most powerful medium in Ghana, I encourage students to listen regularly; but I had to be reminded that Annie could not. Annie did some

[13]Thus far an applicant has not presented or disclosed a disability that couldn't be accommodated on the program, with preparation.

independent research on how deaf and hearing impaired Ghanaians fare, and was troubled to learn that few resources exist and that otherwise normal Ghanaians commonly are institutionalized along with people with unrelated diagnoses, ranging from Down's syndrome to cerebral palsy to mobility impairment. As Annie wrote:

> Only the very wealthy can afford to send their deaf child to residential schools, sometimes out of the country. . . .
> If I had been born here, I likely would have only relied on sign and not my hearing at all. I might have never learned to speak or even to read. I would have had no other options. (Keenon, 2011, paras. 9, 11)

Annie felt helpless in the moment, but later reported what she did as an outcome:

> After returning to the United States, I couldn't stop thinking about the people I had met. I became determined to support disability rights however I could. Gradually my footsteps turned away from journalism (though I did manage to finish my degree) and toward international development. Years later, I found myself working on disability rights internationally, supporting men and women with disabilities in places like Indonesia, Myanmar and Haiti. Though my life has changed course again since, I remain a fervent disability rights advocate – a life's purpose that is easily traced back to that one summer in Ghana. (Keenan, 2018, para. 5)

CULTURE

Class, gender, sexuality, racioethnic identity and disability identity are obviously entwined with many dimensions of culture that challenge students and instructors and constitute lively discussion topics. Here I will briefly mention two: bribery and religion.

The common practice of *soli*, i.e., sources giving journalists envelopes with *transportation money* at press conferences and events, is initially horrifying, and a common topic of blog posts and final papers. As time goes on, and in dialogue, students are less judgmental. While they do not condone bribery, nor does the Ghana Journalists' Association or other professional media/communication organizations, they recognize that journalists' salaries are appallingly low, and many depend on the revenue. They also begin to understand that soli emerged in part from Ghana's gift-giving culture. Plus, while soli is not practiced in the U.S., we discuss the many ways that journalists may be compromised

by political and economic pressures, and the many challenging ethical issues journalists everywhere face[14].

Most Ghanaians are religious, and the ways in which religion pervades everyday life are startling at first. Religion is blatant in much advertising signage, as in "Divine Name Plumbing Works", "Keep Faith Engineering", or "Grace of God Cold Store". Many workdays begin with prayers, including at media houses, advertising and public relations firms. Preachers are a common presence on public transportation. News headlines and sources often reference *God* and *Jesus*, as in the previously referenced headline for Erin's story on gay marriage. While Ghana is predominantly Christian, Ghanaians are tolerant of religious difference, and Christians and Muslims live peacefully side by side. Traditional beliefs also are practiced, often alongside Christian or Muslim practices. Government events commonly begin with three kinds of prayers: Christian, Muslim, and a traditional pouring of libations.

Many of our participants identify as agnostic or atheist. Others may practice a religion but minimally, or a religion uncommon in Ghana. Co-workers frequently confront our student interns with questions about their personal beliefs, and sometimes they are even expected to take a turn leading morning prayers. As with questions about sexuality, they learn how to respond diplomatically and in ways that can sometimes lead to surprising conversations, as in Leigh's experience after marking "none" on her internship application:

> After filling out paperwork I was introduced to my boss who was surprised and intrigued I did not belong to a specific religion . . . I explained to him my perspective on religion and my spiritual beliefs despite fearing he may not respect me for not being Christian. . . .
> He revealed he too had many questions regarding Christianity. He described . . . corruption in his church, which motivated him to stop going on Sundays. . . .
> My boss described his perspective on religion behind his closed office door so quietly it was barely audible. It was evident he was nervous to share his ambivalent ideas surrounding religion, but it was also clear he wished to talk to someone with a different perspective. (Fahrion, 2019, paras. 3-4, 7)

Similarly, Donny struggled to find common ground with his reporting partner, Melvin, and eventually found that Melvin, like him, was skeptical of organized religion, a discovery that greatly strengthened their friendship (Morrison, 2019b).

Leigh and Donny's experiences are less common. Most students are invited by coworkers to attend church, even weddings, funerals, and baby-naming ceremonies.

They are consistently grateful for the opportunity and usually find it joyful and far more about relationships and community than dogma. Luke reported several students' three-hour experience in a charismatic church. Having endured long, tiring services in the synagogue back home, he was anticipating something similar, but found it was quite the opposite (Hausman, 2012). Hannah, also Jewish, was similarly dubious, and especially having been in uncomfortable workplace discussions about sexuality, but found the experience uplifting and consciousness-raising about the value of the non-material in Ghana.

> I was rightfully nervous entering a place of worship, the epicenter of both the connecting power of religion as well as the fear and ignorance used to discriminate against those who are different from oneself.
> Once again, my expectations were proven incorrect. Instead of preaching hate, the service was an enthusiastic display of love and devotion through music. . . .
> While traditionally, I have been pretty skeptical about organized religion, it was attending church in Ghana when I began to understand why people turn to spirituality. . . . Instead of focusing on hate and fear, what I experienced was the power of religion to uplift people and bring them together. . . .
> As the obrunis were leaving, the Prophet stopped us. Neither he nor his daughter cared that none of us were religious, but he wanted to thank us for coming. It was nerve-wracking to be singled out, but even though I was an outsider, I felt welcomed and accepted. (Steinkoph-Frank, 2015, paras. 8-9, 16-17)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Evidence from multiple sources over the years – group discussions, blog posts, internship reports, media logs, and ongoing relationships with program alums – show that in just a few weeks students and fellow instructors have profound, even life-changing experiences, with outcomes dependent on multiple factors: where each began relevant to difference and diversity; bonds formed; personal initiative; and reflections during and after the trip. It has been gratifying to see participants experience great personal growth, i.e., to move from a state of profound culture shock to one of self-confidence. In addition to a sense of growth, they become close to one another, develop enduring relationships with Ghanaians; have professional achievements; and continue to reflect critically on their experiences. Most significant of all, students report a greatly heightened, even transformational, consciousness of human interrelations and social injustice, and a commitment to act. For instance, at the end of his program, Francis wrote:

> More impactful than any other single moment on this trip, was the sickening experience of walking through slave castles and learning about the atrocities of the European colonizers in the very rooms where their crimes took place. At a time when there are people in cages in my own country, my time in the forts forced me to recommit to the cause of justice and freedom worldwide as a political activist. (O'Leary, 2019b, para. 4)

Many also become deeply committed to bridging differences in their personal lives and finding existential meaning in the non-material. Freire's thinking extends beyond pedagogy, as Suzina and Tufte (2020) point out, "It is a vision with a set of foundational principles and values that guide the constitution of a social order, inspire a practice of communication and social interaction, and also serve as a normative guide for co-existence in society" (pp. 412-413). Many Media in Ghana students try to find words to express this realization. Just before departure Clare wrote a post titled "On Kindness and Generosity".

> If someone asked me to tell them one thing I learned here I would give them those two words. . . . When someone is eating at work even if it's just a small snack they always look to me, point towards their corn or bread or cookies and say "you are invited." When my two coworkers found out I was vegetarian they drove me 30 minutes out, so that I could try fufu at a vegetarian restaurant. . . . The people here have reminded me to be more open to friendships, to remember to share, to look out for those around me, and to show kindness and generosity to everyone I meet. (Malone, 2018, paras. 3-4)

Obviously programs like Media in Ghana are limited. They represent the privilege of the Global North and are largely unidirectional, relying on the hospitality of Ghanaians (see Tilley & Kalina, 2021). Though imbalanced, I have tried to reciprocate as possible[15]. Such programs also are limited by how many they can serve. Not all students are motivated to study abroad, and of those who are, only a fraction choose a program in a developing country. Programs further tend to serve students at two extreme ends of the economic spectrum: those with means, and those who qualify for need-based scholarships. Plus, there are valid climate change arguments for avoiding air travel.

In view of these realities, I encourage returning students to share their insights with others, thereby multiplying the impact, such as by speaking

[15]Ways we have tried to reciprocate include: recruiting numerous Ghanaians to Oregon for graduate degrees, supporting visiting Ghanaian scholars, serving as an external examiner for the University of Ghana (UG) and recruiting other colleagues to do so as well, and by developing and encouraging research collaboration. Likewise, the students are asked to transport requested supplies for the UG and to bring gifts for their new colleagues. Also they are encouraged to build collaborations that may extend beyond the program.

in classes, publishing articles and photos, and via post-trip social justice activism and in everyday personal relations, as indicated by students quoted above. Importantly, sustaining relationships with program alums constitutes valuable participation – even approaching empowerment participation (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009) – and continues to shape the program. Several alums have returned to Ghana for jobs or volunteer positions, sometimes joining up with our group for portions of the trip. Many have reported career-changing decisions as an outcome, as in the case of Annie, quoted earlier (Keenon, 2018). Oliver, who participated in 2004, subsequently built a career in experiential education based in Cape Town, South Africa. Cassie and Kayleigh, 2007 and 2013 participants, respectively, have pursued careers in international development for social justice. All three attribute these choices directly to Media in Ghana (DeFillipo, 2017; Hagen, 2017; Young, 2017).

Finally, and given the limits and critiques of travel, it goes without saying that there are other strategies to move college-level students and teachers toward praxis and *conscientização* by applying Freirean concepts to curricula close to home. Transformative personal growth does require engaging in risky and often painful personal struggle, but this can happen in many ways and venues. As Freire (1998) powerfully summarizes:

> To study is to uncover; it is to gain a more exact *comprehension* of an object; it is to realize its relationship to other objects. This implies a requirement for risk taking and venturing on the part of a student, the subject of learning, for without that they do not create or re-create. (p. 21)

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