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An Honors Pilot Course: Cross-Cultural Service and Inquiry-Based Learning in Mérida, Mexico

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INTRODUCTION

The guiding document for Kent State University's Honors College, "The Nature of an Honors Course," describes some of the unique aspects that set Honors courses apart from non-Honors courses. We expect an Honors course to be an experience and a process; we encourage students to take initiatives in determining the directions of the courses. One of our driving goals is to find ways to help students extract more intellectual value out of their university experiences, and the cross-cultural pilot course in Mérida, México described here was designed with that goal in mind.

BACKGROUND

As part of Kent State University's commitment to the Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP), which was initiated by the North Central Association/ Higher Learning Commission as an experimental accreditation process in 2001, each college at our institution was charged to review priorities and establish action projects. One of the three AQIP Action Projects our Honors College set forth for the first three years (2002–2005) was to recruit more students for off-campus learning experiences such as study abroad and the National Student Exchange program. The course "Cross-Cultural Service and Inquiry-Based Learning in Mérida, Mexico" was one of the more interesting and exciting developments that not only aligned well with our action project but also satisfied several of the criteria set forth in "The Nature of an Honors Course."

RATIONALE

Three questions motivated the instructor of the pilot course and the Honors College coordinator of curriculum to collaborate in the design and implementation of a pilot course at Kent State University: (1) What motivates students to

engage in learning across cultures and languages? (2) What strategies do students employ to negotiate across language and cultural barriers? (3) What types of learning experiences could we provide that would help students to be aware of the global influences on their future professions and also the effect of their actions on a global community?

DESCRIPTION OF THE PILOT COURSE

Honors students from various disciplines participated in the learning experience provided by the pilot course. The disciplines of the nine enrolled students included anthropology, biology and pre-med, psychology, broadcast journalism, visual communication design, and education (majors and minors, including pre-service teachers in language arts and in second languages such as Spanish and French). The course was offered during the 2004–2005 academic year, and the credit hours were posted to the students' spring schedule. However, students began meeting monthly with the instructor during fall semester. Participants also used an online course delivery system (in this case, WebCT 2002), which helped with the process of community building while it also provided communication tools such as a discussion board and chat room. The centerpiece of the course was a 10-day learning experience in Mexico in January between semesters. During the off-campus experience in Mexico, students stayed with host families. Then, during spring semester, students worked on their portfolios and fulfilled the responsibility of dissemination by, for example, presenting at external conferences, sharing experiences at a study-abroad fair during international week, sharing information at an Honors College gathering, and presenting at the KSU Celebration of Scholarship.

The learning goals of the pilot course were that students would

- deepen self-knowledge and growth (personal development) through project-based and/or service-learning experiences;
- come to understand and develop their career/life/professional plans in relation to an enhanced global view;
- increase cross-cultural understanding and respect for other perspectives;
- gain experience working collaboratively with diverse populations; and
- connect the local to the global through socio-cultural and service-learning experiences.

In his book, *Beyond Tourism*, Kenneth Cushner discusses similar learning goals in relation to study-abroad experiences:

> Humans, as social beings, learn best in situations where the complexity of social reality is encountered, examined, and understood. . . . In the situated learning that occurs in a well-structured international travel experience, the context enables learners to participate in the social milieu of the host setting,

> allowing them to build rapport with locals, interpersonal relationships with host families, and identification with a local community. . . . The lived experience is thus the critical element in gaining a meaningful understanding of other cultures as well as one's own place in an interconnected world. (119–120)

An inquiry-based project and service learning were the vehicles employed to accomplish the aims and goals of the pilot course.

First, students designed the inquiry-based projects. They each wrote research questions connected to their professional goals and began their investigations in the United States. Then, after traveling to Mexico, the student learning community expanded cross-culturally to include Mexican collaborators from diverse backgrounds and disciplines. The global partners from Mexico who participated in the project included teachers, archaeologists, psychologists, doctors, studio artists, elected officials, the director of a marketing college, university students, and PK-12 students as well as the host families with whom they resided. Our students were actively engaged in diverse communities of varying economic levels: hospitals, artist studios, a bilingual school, a Montessori school, archaeological sites, adult literacy program sites, a Mayan ecological reserve, psychiatric hospitals (private and public), and universities. In addition, in order to discuss several global themes of shared interest, the Honors College students participated in a forum structured as a town-hall meeting, which was attended by Mexican elected officials, the vice consul from the American Embassy, and university students from Mexico.

These kinds of learning experiences illustrate Alexander Werth's point that a metadisciplinary strategy in honors curricula will "transcend traditional boundaries to create a truly holistic, systematic, integrative worldview uncluttered by familiar limits and barriers" (36). He advocates a pedagogical approach that will enable students to understand how all disciplinary fields are fundamentally related and suggests an approach that treats disciplines "tangentially, by using them as sources of interconnected facts, ideas, and insights that help students to make sense of the world and their place in it" (38). Our inquiry-based projects with cross-cultural collaborators might be considered one approach to transcending traditional academic boundaries.

In addition to the inquiry-based component of the course, the students also worked on the preparation of materials for a service-learning project. One such project was to teach American culture lessons in area schools in Mexico. As well as meeting the service-learning requirement, this component added another layer to the inquiry-based project. The Honors students selected the topics and themes for the American culture lesson based on their areas of specialization and future professions. The lessons were interactive and frequently included surveys. This process enabled the Honors students to receive feedback from the students in Mexico on topics connected to their majors. For example, a

student majoring in anthropology prepared a lesson on Native Americans in Ohio. The Mexican students then shared information about the Mayan culture. They also answered questions in a survey about the Mayan culture that asked, for example, whether they had Mayan roots, whether they celebrated those roots, and what their attitude was towards indigenous populations in Mexico.

The Mexican students' benefit derived from the cultural content of the multimedia lesson and the English language practice. Also, the Kent State Honors students gave their multimedia presentation materials to the Mexican teachers for use in their future classes. Both groups (Kent State Honors students and Mexican students) benefited from the cross-cultural exchange of ideas and opinions. Elaborating on R. Sigmon's claim that good service learning deepens academic curricula while at the same time responding to real community need, Boyle-Baise & Kilbane state that "service-learning pedagogy, with its real-world focus, emphasis on critical reflection, and impetus for reciprocity, can structure community-based learning" (54).

Other American culture lessons created by the Honors students captured the same multilayered experience as the anthropology one previously described. The titles of some of these service learning projects include "TV in America—the National Distraction"; "The Arts, Health and Hip Hop Culture in the U.S."; "Design Thru Your Eyes"; and "U.S. High Schools." Through the presentation of the multimedia lessons, interactive discussions, and surveys, the Honors students gathered data about Mexican students' television viewing habits, attitudes toward mental health problems, reactions to visual design, and opinions and ideas on a wide array of topics that could be used to address their inquiry-based project research questions.

A second service-learning initiative was the Mayan Village Project. Kent State Honors students participated in an after-school literacy project for Mayan children. Before leaving the U.S., the Honors students collected items to take to Mexico for the after-school project such as books, chalk, balls, crayons, paints, toothbrushes, toys, and notebooks. While at the Mexican building constructed by Habitat for Humanity, students taught songs in English, taught and played games, drew sidewalk images, participated in arts and crafts, and found ways to connect with the elementary-school Mayan children. The Honors students also participated in a colloquium with the teacher in the After School Program about problems faced by the Mayan children in that village and about issues related to education. The discussion during the colloquium provided another opportunity for the Honors students to link the service learning experience to their inquiry-based project, their knowledge of self, and their role in a global community. Issues of health, nutrition, mental health, education, and some of the external forces influencing the Mayan community resonated with the students as they reflected on the complexity of factors that need to be addressed to improve living conditions.

Throughout the project in Mexico, Honors students faced many cultural and language barriers, but the students were inventive in finding ways to

communicate in order to achieve their goals. Some of the challenges they faced were contacting experts and resource people, establishing meetings, obtaining transportation, managing oral and written communication issues, among others. Students collaborated with many different members of the expanded learning community to help them face these challenges. For example, sometimes a colleague from Kent State or a member of the Mexican host family served as an interpreter (if neither the Honors student nor the professional expert were bilingual). Also, students discovered that some of their research instruments and surveys had to be translated into Spanish and sought help from peers and experts.

One source feeding this inventiveness was the students' situation as a community in a community. In the NCHC monograph *Teaching and Learning in Honors*, Linda W. Rutland Gillison asserts that "bright well-prepared students in a small group who know each other well can become mutual springboards of ideas and mutual questioners of claims which are the best spurs to good critical thinking and writing" (39). As these nine students worked within their small community and along with their collaborators' community, they had amplified opportunities to sharpen their critical thinking skills in relation to their projects and in relationship to their roles as world citizens. As Gillison and others have acknowledged, education has always seen the development of a knowledgeable and capable citizenry as one of its primary purposes (38). Even though numerous students gave testimonials, we include one student's testimonial to this effect:

> . . . The contacts made and the interviews were very helpful. I received a lot of quality information. Also, many questions that I didn't even think of were answered. It helped to be able to work closely with [Student A] and [Student B] because we were all able to contribute questions and insights that were unique. From this experience, I gained valuable insight into some of the cultural and familial problems that people are facing in Mexico and how those are affecting the mental health of children in the country. [These three collaborating students represented different but related disciplines.]

Assessment was based on portfolios that the students submitted at the end of the pilot course. The components for the portfolio were

- inquiry-based project: inquiry questions, surveys, interviews of professionals and experts in Mexico, reflections, results of research;
- service-learning projects: multimedia teaching project, participation in volunteer work in Mayan village, reflection;
- journal: four-part journaling process, based on suggestions from Paige et al., *Maximizing Study Abroad* (115–119);

- dissemination: description of how discoveries and knowledge will be shared with others; and
- follow-up reports.

The portfolios were meant, in part, to document the engagement of which Cushner writes:

> Individuals must ultimately embark on a sojourn that fully engages their cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. It is the kinds of experiences that students have while in country that become critical to achieving the desired goals of meaningful international travel. (50)

Sample excerpts from the student reflections showing how they relate to the goals of the course are provided in the Appendix.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Students explored who they were through the lens of a different culture and explored their role in a global community through inquiry-based and service-learning projects. Many disciplines intersected during the process, enabling students to observe not only the cross-cultural relationship but also the cross-disciplinary nature of the experience. However, we (the instructor and the Honors College coordinator) believe that the experience should expand beyond the expression of individual discoveries to include ways in which students could create a collective body of work that would enable them to relate and integrate the various disciplines into a global articulation of knowledge and understanding. The desire to have a collective body of work as a part of the course has motivated us to select a unifying theme, such as migration, within which students will link their individual disciplines and future life/professional/career goals with those of others, both here and abroad. The design of the future course will enable students from the Kent State Honors College to collaborate with university students from Mexico via an online learning environment as well as through a ten-day experience in Mexico. While in Mexico, students will form problem-solving teams, focusing on some aspect of the common theme. Shared inquiries, common concerns, and related disciplines are factors that may influence the composition of the teams.

CONCLUSION

In the chapter "Beyond Tourism: The Importance of Experience on Impact," Cushner writes that "the experience abroad . . . engages the student holistically, the entire process involving both physical and psychological transitions that impact the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains" (111–121). At the one-year anniversary date of the intensive cross-cultural service and inquiry-based

learning experience in Mexico, Kent Honors students have reported similar impacts to those mentioned in that chapter.

Various combinations of students have reported that they have

- explored additional study-abroad opportunities (two students have confirmed plans for 2006, including one participant in the Honors semester in Wales);
- researched more on Mexico;
- expanded professional goals to include an international focus;
- used the experience to help define their career goals;
- maintained contact with people whom they met while in Mexico (one student stating that a host family sister will be visiting);
- taken additional language courses;
- sought out international students on campus (more fully valuing other perspectives and feeling themselves to be less judgmental);
- increased self-confidence; and
- questioned more fully the information they received via classes and/or media.

The Honors project placed students within a Mexican community, and the reflective nature of the course provided students with a framework within which to interpret their experiences. Our hope is that these types of course designs, using cross-cultural service and inquiry-based learning, will promote transformative learning experiences whereby students view their identities and their future career goals within a global context. Then, as global citizens, they are motivated to continue and expand upon their international knowledge and experience through the process of life-long learning.

> I feel like a door has been opened that will never be shut again—I will always know that there is more out there, no matter where I go or what I see—there will always be more out there. It truly affected my ideas about who I am and where I fit within the global society. (Student Participant)

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APPENDIX

Learning Goals and Samples of Student Reflections

Learning Goal:
To Deepen Self-Knowledge and Growth (Personal Development) Through Project-Based and/or Service Learning;

—Being able to experience life within another culture opened my eyes to a whole different world. I feel that I returned to the United States more aware of my surroundings and that I now take notice of how things are done here and consider them more carefully before just blindly believing that that is how it must be done.

—I feel that while in Mérida, México, I discovered more about my own identity as an individual and my identity within the cultures to which I belong. Just being able to experience another culture and to compare it with my own helped me to better understand the world I live in. I feel like I have a better understanding of how I fit into the culture within the United States, as well as within a global community.

Learning Goal:
To Come to Understand and Develop Career/Life/Professional Plans in Relation to an Enhanced Global View;

—I learned that the stigma of mental illness knows very few boundaries, that it is a common problem both in the United States and Mexico. Mexican psychologists also face many of the same issues that we face here, so there is definitely a need for a more global understanding and cooperation between cultures to address these complex issues.

—I also visited a marketing college and while examining curriculum there were distinct differences. This helped me to see how design is being taught differently in Mexico and gave me ideas on how to expand my communication realm as well. This helped me to remember how important it is to think globally not locally all the time.

—Being a Spanish Education major, the trip to Mérida, Mexico was practically made for my major, in a sense, because we worked with schools and we were surrounded by the Spanish language and culture. Not all the preplanned learning and observing that I set out for in regards to my project happened. What did happen, it turns out, was even better than I could have planned. My observations at the Montessori school, new perspectives, and my experiences all have enhanced my knowledge as a future teacher.

Learning Goal:
To Increase Cross-Cultural Understanding and Respect for Other Perspectives;

—That was the biggest lesson that I learned from Mexico: Don't rule out cultural values as wrong and unacceptable simply because those values do not match mine.

—I believe that the experience at the Mexican school will affect how I interact with students when I become a teacher. I've learned to realize that students from any culture unlike my own might be used to doing things differently and that it is important that I take this into consideration and do all that I can to make the student feel comfortable and at ease.

—Attention and listening means a lot to people universally I'm noticing. I made origami flying birds for children as a gift. This gesture meant a lot to the children who laughed and smiled and to the adults who see this as the effort and appreciation—gift. Visual communication—these birds translated better than "thank you very much" in Spanish would have, because that's what I was trying to say. What I'm taking with me here is that design must push towards a global message because the world is getting smaller.

Learning Goal:
To Gain Experience Working Collaboratively with Diverse Populations;

—I did find some distinct differences in the way education was practiced in Mexico. For example, in the classroom, there is more of a group-oriented approach to learning, as opposed to our American individualistic, competitive method. The kids worked together to find the answer, not each one working on his own to beat the others. . . . I do believe this experience has made a difference in how I will face my career in the field of education. I want to follow a more group-oriented approach in my classroom and allow the students to work together to learn and discover. Also, I am very impressed at the way students begin learning English at such an early age, beginning at kindergarten in many schools. . . . There is a lack of interest and urgency to learn foreign languages in our country and I would like to help children realize the importance of diversity and being able to communicate and travel and be global citizens as opposed to being confined to our own language and culture.

—For my individual project, my objective was to learn as much as I could about the Mexican culture and ideology of the doctors because I knew that if I could understand the culture, then I could better see how the culture spilled over into the practice of medicine.

—I will apply this experience when I enter the medical field, when I treat patients that are from other cultures, it is necessary for me to be considerate of their values and ethics during treatment so that the patient receives the best care possible.

—I learned to communicate and relate to people who lived in a different culture and spoke a different language than my own, but we were bound by our common desire to help people, to want to ease somebody's pain from the emotional turmoil they are suffering. In addition, I also learned the value of patience and compassion that by being considerate of others and genuinely caring you can overcome so much, even if you don't speak the same language.

Learning Goal:
To Connect the Local to the Global through Socio-Historical/Cultural and Service Learning Experiences;

—The visit to the Archeological Reserve was also an invaluable experience. The Archaeologist's tour of the reserve gave me information that I wouldn't have been able to find elsewhere. Projects like this biocultural reserve are important learning tools that can teach us about our environment and our heritage. . . . I was glad to meet someone like him (the archaeologist) trying to preserve our past through archaeology and our future through the environment.

—Television Choices in Mexico: What, Why and Why Not. What I want to find out through my time in Mexico is if television is as engrained in their lives, and what are the consequences. . . . What do children, teenagers, adults watch in Mexico, and if it is different than America what does that say about the state of our cultures?

—This experience was worth more to me personally and professionally than I will ever truly be able to explain. While I have seen changes in the way I view myself and my community since I've returned, one of my biggest changes is just the realization that there is so much more out there.