

Disrupting Liberal Discourse in a Neoliberal World: The Potential of Transformative Education During a Short Term Study Abroad Course in Cuba

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Abstract

Can transformative learning experiences be achieved in short term study abroad programs given the hold that liberal and neoliberal ideologies have on student thinking? Basing ourselves on Hall's and Foucault's analyses of liberalism and neoliberalism respectively and Mezirow's work on transformative learning, we examine, and learn from, the experiences of two groups of Canadian students who visited Cuba within the framework of a supposedly transformative program.

Keywords: transformative education; global citizenship; neoliberalism; metacognition

Introduction

Six months after our initial involvement with the inaugural run of a global education course offered in Cuba, one of the authors found herself wedged into a middle airplane seat between two men flying from Toronto to Havana. Both men were immigrants to Canada as well as veteran travellers to Cuba, and both were enamoured with its culture; yet, each held different narratives about contemporary Cuba, its people, and its national policies. Juan, a Salvadorian Canadian married to a Cuban, viewed the Cuban Revolution as a success story – a small differential between the rich and the poor, maintained through government subsidised food, transportation, utilities, health care, and education. Johnny, an Italian Canadian, believed that this desire for 'everyone to be equal' stymied progress and deterred individual initiative. From his perspective, Cuba is in crisis with multiple generations forced to live in a single residence, continued dependence on food rations, and an educated population lacking professional opportunities. We begin with these men because their stories simultaneously represent the dichotomised attitudes expressed by two different groups of students who participated with us in a two-week course of study in Havana (in subsequent years) and the difficulty of trans-

formative learning when one's beliefs cannot be budged by the liberal gesture of politely listening to others and their realities.

Our Canadian students, ranged in age, ethnicity, education, and travel experience, and they polarised along lines similar to Juan and Johnny. Sometimes they occupied one pole consistently, as did Bill¹, who was exceptionally enthusiastic about the Cuban Revolution and its successes. Mostly, though, students migrated between these two poles, occupying them at different moments and on different issues. The benefits derived from this ability to acknowledge strengths and weaknesses of Cuba's national history and culture were, however, notably mitigated by the trap of cultural liberalism—a tolerance for individual and social differences that withholds judgment (Button, 2008; Heineman, 1984). While global education certainly does not strive to engender a cultural hierarchy, it does seek to create a sense of interconnectedness in which differences relate to one another rather than simply being juxtaposed (Case, 1997; Selby, 2004). Thus, the problem with cultural liberalism in this case is not an implicit equality but an explicit lack of meaningful engagement. A cultural liberal can hold a belief in diametric opposition to another without feeling any need to negotiate the tensions, contradictions, and overlaps between the two, creating each belief as an island unaffected by existence of other islands of belief. In this way, liberal coping strategies that privilege silent acquiesce over political struggle can impede the process of educational transformation by allowing the student traveller to sidestep the deliberative work of critically engaging new information in favour of quarantining such information into separate, though equally valid, frameworks.

Although the long and rich history of liberalism has contained an inherently progressive stress on free-thinking, rationalism, and scepticism (Hall, 1986: 39), that same history has fuelled a culture of non-engagement through a public-private split that quarantines deliberation about political and economic issues squarely within the state and other institutions responsible for greasing the wheels of capitalism (Crowley, 2006:18). Neoliberalism makes use of both these aspects (cultural divergence and economic convergence) by putting an unequivocal acceptance of difference to work on behalf of a rather uniform global economic agenda (Giroux, 2005; Jameson, 1999; Zizek, 1997). The dominant political economic apparatus across the globe works within a range of different cultural and ethnic spaces as long as those differences are not put into dialogue with one another. Indeed, even the strongest critics of neoliberalism frequently explore its political and economic tenets, a democratic state that forfeits its mandate to the market economy, and leave its cultural framework underexplored (Harvey, 2005). This kind of isolated thinking, what we are calling non-deliberative engagement, filters throughout society in the form of what Henry Giroux (2004; 2007) has named public pedagogy and was evidenced in our students' attitudes toward Cuba.

Our students' learning processes in Cuba were much like the conversation between Juan and Johnny who talked throughout the entire three-hour flight, with little deliberation, as neither budged from their opposed starting points. Like these men, the students tended to occupy different islands with little attempt to bridge those existences. The students limited themselves to expressing individual beliefs which were disengaged from the views of their fellow students. Seemingly incapable of deliberation, that space wherein ideas evolve as individuals take positions which are challenged by others, the students were most comfortable with discussion characterised by agreement and much less comfortable when disagreement emerged. Because global education works to help students place identities and cultures in dialogue and not simply in parallel play with one another (Andreotti and Warwick, 2007), the absence of deliberation limits the impact of study abroad experiences such as our global education trip to Cuba. Through an examination of our students and their exploration of Cuba, we have come to believe, first, that a liberal culture of tolerance maintains the dominance of a neoliberal political economic worldview by falling back on such notions as individualism, privacy, and non-interference, and, second, that this coupling mutes the deliberative activities necessary for transformative education.

At first glance, our experience in Cuba suggests that students steeped in the liberal orthodoxy that underlies curriculum in the West, despite occasional rhetorical commitment to the importance of teaching mainstreamed versions of critical thinking (Ibrahim, 2005), are ill-prepared for such engagement (O'Sullivan, 2008; Andreotti, 2006; Giroux, 1997, 2001). However, we cannot be overly dogmatic in this assertion. Within liberal education there is a dialectical interplay that involves tensions among the formal curricular requirements, the curriculum that is actually taught, students' lived experiences, their personal intellectual trajectories, and, indeed, their personal traits and commitments. While we maintain our conviction that, for the majority of the students, lack of engagement/deliberation characterised our brief Cuban study abroad experience, certain individual participants did succeed in getting beyond the 'Cuba as exotic locale' stage, what Paul Pederson (1995) calls the honeymoon stage, and began to experience the disruption that is an essential precondition for a transformative educative experience.

Participants and Method

Two groups of students from St. Catharines, Canada, one in May, 2008 and a second in May, 2009, spent two weeks in Cuba on a two week, intensive half-credit course. This course, Global Education: International Field Experience, is an elective which was designed to be offered 'in various locations, usually, but not always, overseas' and 'to explore global issues (e.g., development, culture, gender, ecology, human rights, social justice) from the perspective of the local inhabitants' (Brock Undergraduate Calendar, 2010-11). This course is one of three global education courses

offered by the Faculty of Education. The others are an undergraduate course (offered as an elective exclusive to the faculty's pre-service teacher candidates) and a graduate course neither of which offer a field experience component. The Cuba iteration of the field experience course was designed to offer an overview of Cuban history, politics, and culture through a series of lectures offered each morning, followed by afternoon excursions to museums, cultural sites, and other points of interest. Students receive course credit based on their participation in predeparture meetings and scheduled sessions while in-country, as well as on a reflective journal and a final essay on a topic arising from their time in Cuba. This elective is offered in partnership with the Department of English of the Faculty of Foreign Languages (FLEX) at the University of Havana.

The 2008 group consisted of sixteen participants while fourteen participated in the 2009 group. The students ranged in travel experience, some having never left home and others having travelled extensively. Of those who had previous travel experience, some had visited Cuban beach resorts, an experience not uncommon among those of us who must endure the Canadian winters. In addition to the course instructor, co-author Michael O'Sullivan, an assistant professor in the Brock University Faculty of Education, the 2008 group included co-author Catharine Chaput, assistant professor in the Department of English who also accompanied the 2009 group, as did Christine Arnold, a graduate Faculty of Education student who joined the writing team following our return to Canada. Among the participants in the 2008 group, 11 were women and 4 were men. The 2009 group consisted entirely of women with the exception of the course instructor. The ages of the participants ranged from late teens to early 60s. Only one participant, a student in the first cohort, spoke Spanish. Lectures at the University of Havana were offered in English or were translated by bilingual students from our host faculty.

With an interest in examining issues of community building and group conflict during the first iteration of this study abroad experience, we conducted post-travel interviews, studied student journals which the students gave us permission to cite, and explored our own anecdotal experiences from the trip². The interview data were transcribed and coded according to the most prevalent themes. During our review of the data, we noticed that in addition to addressing their coping strategies, students also cited a number of contradictions they perceived within Cuban culture.

The different themes within these two categories were studied using critical discourse analysis. As Joan Elias Gore (2009:289) explains, 'discourse analysis examines how things are understood and how they come to be valued.' Critical discourse analysis goes one step further and explores how these values connect to the political, cultural, and economic contexts in which such values emerge (Banks, 2004; Fairclough, 1999; Foucault, 1972; Kymlicka, 1995). Thus, we analysed our data twice: first, we investigated the narrative themes built up around coping strategies and perceptions of Cuban society, and, second, we explored how such stories intersect

with larger sociocultural and political contexts. In so doing, we recognised an interplay between students' use of liberal strategies such as separating public and private, tolerance for others' beliefs (Crowley, 2006; Hall, 1986) and dependence on neoliberal worldviews that measure success through market indices (Brown, 2003; Foucault, 2008; Harvey, 2005) .

Given the hegemony of liberalism in Canadian society, we were hardly surprised that students negotiated both each other and cultural difference through a clearly liberal framework (Smits, 2000). What did surprise us was that we failed at first to understand how a liberal ideological framework of social and cultural tolerance sustained a neoliberal economic structure by shutting down inquiry and debate. Students overwhelmingly stated that individuals should make small concessions to maintain larger group harmony. This same liberal sentiment holds true with regard to their explanation of Cuba. Students identified conflicts and contradictions with the socio-political structure of Cuba; however, they ultimately withheld judgment. This liberal strategy conspicuously avoids dialogue and potential controversy in favour of living parallel but unengaged lives. In retrospect we should not have been surprised by the power of liberalism and its taken for granted practices (Hall, 1986) on students' experiences in Cuba. As Foucault (2008) points out, neoliberalism operates to give organic coherence to life patterns. Neoliberalism governs our everyday activities through an embodied habituation or way of thinking and acting that stems from discrete, but interconnected practices bound within the same asymmetrical power dynamics of economic competition (Foucault, 2008). So conceived, neoliberalism is every bit as much a cultural phenomena as it is a political economic practice. Neoliberalism is a culture that enables a particular political economic schema.

These theories of liberalism and neoliberalism help us frame our students' engagement and disengagement with their Cuban experience. As our research will demonstrate, students often reinforce neoliberal criteria in their assessment of Cuba. This was particularly true in regard to what they perceived as contradictions within education, tourism, and their lack of comfort with the political propaganda ubiquitous throughout Havana. Students' were uncomfortable with these spaces not operating via open competition and meritocratic reward, a key tenet of both liberalism (MacPherson, 1977) and neoliberalism (Friedman, 1962; Friedman and Friedman 1980). While these spaces were judged through a neoliberal lens, the students reverted back to a more traditional brand of liberalism as they attempted to make sense of the supposed contradictions. This liberal strategy, personal and cultural acceptance of all difference, utilises discussion but not deliberation: students expressed a range of ideas but did not engage in debates about the causes, consequences, and interconnections of those ideas.

The Essential Ingredients of Transformative Learning in Study Abroad

We are aware of the challenges represented in trying to achieve a transformative educational experience. What is a transformative experience? Is it sufficient to open students' eyes to the lives of others? Does it involve developing a radical critique of neoliberal globalisation and an understanding of North-South relations? Are we seeking to create global anti-poverty or environmental activists? Is a study abroad experience, such as the one analysed in these pages, considered a failure if less than one or more of the outcomes suggested by these questions fails to occur? These are complex issues that each educator who organises a study abroad experience must grapple with and, of course, not all will agree on a common definition of what constitutes a successful experience.

Regardless of where one lands on the spectrum of statements defining a transformative experience, study abroad offers a privileged opportunity for a far-reaching change in the student traveller's way of looking at, and being in, the world. For instance, Keith (2005:16) suggests that if a study abroad participant returns home reinforced in the view, 'I am so lucky', then the experience is a failure. Nonetheless, Samantha Dear (2010), describes her first 'helping the poor' study abroad experience as transformational in that it motivated her to devote herself to the theory and practice of international service-learning based on developing 'reciprocal relationships' between Northern and Southern partners (2010).

Nigel Dower (2008) provides insight on the expectations we have of students as they are presented with potentially transformative experiences. He asks:

[Is it] that we produce a lot of educated young adults who at least have a basic knowledge of the world and an openness to it but who, apart from having ... a general attitude of tolerance of diversity and sympathy for those who suffer elsewhere in the world, do not actually *do* very much? Or that we produce a rather smaller number of educated people who become active global citizens and the future 'movers and shakers' of the world? (Dower, 2008: 40, emphasis in original).

Dower (2008: 40) refuses to be bound by the dichotomy 'awareness vs. action.' For him, it is important to produce both those who are open to the world, but not very active, as well as future active global citizens. He notes that:

[g]enerally the same processes of education will lead to 'the many' becoming globally aware, albeit not very active, and 'the few' taking it further to active engagement (Dower, 2008: 40).

The resulting dichotomy – aware *but not active and socially engaged* – implies that the educative experience offers students a de facto choice between challenging their world views/expanding their knowledge base and engaging in a deeply personal and transformative learning experience. By a transformative learning experience we accept the definition provided by the Transformative Learning Centre at the University of Toronto (O'Sullivan, Morrell and O'Connor, 2003:1):

transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift in consciousness that dramatically alters our way of being in the world.

With respect to providing such an experience, we found Jack Mezirow's (1981, 1997, 2000, 2008) theory of transformative learning and Pederson's (1995) concept of culture shock useful in conceptualising the rupture we were hoping to achieve in student thinking during this study abroad experience. Mezirow (2008) argues that transformative learning involves the following progression: 1) elaborating existing frames of reference, 2) learning new frames of reference, 3) transforming points of view, and 4) transforming habits of mind.. Through deliberation with oneself and others, transformative learning encourages students to reflect on the limits of knowledge, the certainty of knowledge, as well as the criteria for knowing and the transformation of frames of reference. By incorporating other frames of reference, students question their own and are put into the position of interrogating, defending, and reinventing their worldviews in light of this new information. According to Mezirow (2008:1), transformative learning works on those frameworks that cannot withstand the scrutiny of new information: 'we become critically reflective of those beliefs that become problematic.' Building on Mezirow's observations, Pederson (1995) argues that transformation theory focuses on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings. Rather than uncritically assimilating the new values we learn, we begin to judge those values for ourselves; long-held beliefs sometimes shatter under the weight of critical evaluation and sometimes develop into stronger, sounder versions of those original beliefs. When a deep understanding of concepts occurs assumptions are challenged and new perspectives emerge. Those who are cognitively aware of the transformation will be able to contemplate their own thinking and be conscious of its evolution (Mezirow, 2008). This metacognitive process constitutes the shift in consciousness so central to Paulo Freire's work (Freire, 1970, 1985).

When it occurs in a study abroad context, transformative learning is frequently provoked by the culture shock that the student traveller experiences. Culture shock applies to any radical change presenting unfamiliar or unexpected circumstances and requires the individual to adopt new coping strategies which will assist him or her to successfully negotiate the norms of the host country (Mezirow, 2008). Not simply a single event, culture shock is a process and takes place at many different levels simultaneously as the individual interacts with a complex new environment (Mezirow, 2008). The shock will be stronger or weaker according to how well the individual learns to cope or fails to cope in the host country. Transformation results as each individual adjusts old assumptions and ways of behaving. Mezirow (2008) offers us a way of thinking about the shifts students do and do not make through travel abroad experiences as well as the ways that liberalism helps and hinders the pedagogical goals of global education.

Disrupting the Impact of a Life time of Liberal and Neoliberal Ideology

Pederson (1995) states that there are five stages of culture shock: 1) the honeymoon, 2) disintegration, 3) reintegration, 4) autonomy, and 5) interdependence. It is our contention that during our two week Cuban experience, the majority of the students did not, and possibly could not be reasonably expected, to get beyond the honeymoon stage. Nevertheless, the honeymoon was not without its disruptions. The challenges of Cuban reality constantly interrupted our students preferred worldviews. In one reductive sense, such experiences offered students a choice to critically re-examine their worldviews in light of considered alternatives or to reinforce their engrained modes of thought. Not surprisingly, our data shows when faced with this choice most unconsciously opted for the comfortable path of reaffirming their established liberal values.

For educators interested in transformative pedagogies this raises the issue of educative strategies that encourage students to more consistently consider alternative modes of thought over the all too easy recourse of reinforcing their established ways of thinking. For this to happen course instructors leading a short term study abroad experience must work to channel Pederson's (1995) process of disintegration (or as we prefer, disruption) into a safe space during the trip in order to facilitate deliberation about, and engagement with, the disrupting environment. The disruption that was experienced involves the intrusion of the norms, cultural traditions and lifestyle of the host culture into those held by the students. If such an intrusion does not occur students are unlikely to experience the motivation to come to terms with the new reality in which they are immersed and thus develop only a preliminary understanding of the other with whom they are now associated. If, however, the disruption is embraced by the student, the potential for transformative learning is created. Some, of course, never leave the honeymoon stage and remain perpetually as tourists, retaining their old ways of thinking, living and loyalties. While we are aware of the limitations imposed by a brief two week experience, we are convinced that length of stay is a secondary factor, tourists who spend a week at a resort and long-term expats who create environments reminiscent of their home countries can be equally enmeshed in the honeymoon stage. The challenge for educators engaged in a short term study abroad is to maximise the impact of the experience by creating the opportunity for reflection during the trip. This is particularly important as group post-trip reflection is often impossible.

We turn now to our research findings, which reveal how the use of liberal discourse reduced the transformative potential of this global education experience. Further, recommendations are made about how educators can bring greater criticality into study abroad experiences.

Part I: Group Tensions and Liberal Responses

There is an understandable tendency among the participants of a study abroad experience to minimise the impact of the disruption of travel by building a sense of community which ensures that group harmony prevails over the stress of travelling to new locations. Ironically, creating such a community to diminish these stresses is often counter-productive to taking advantage of the disruptive instruction of the host culture to initiate the process of transformative learning. The students reported several reoccurring themes when it came to these stresses and their efforts to build community in the face of cultural differences. These themes include Cuban cuisine; personal and group struggle/harmony; and the stress of constant togetherness exacerbated by intense conversations. Students dealt with these three stresses, as we will show, through a range of liberal negotiating strategies. These include remaining silent in the face of conflict, going along with a discussion for the sake of group harmony, trying to coerce group consensus, avoiding certain topics or people, accepting differences, listening politely to those with whom you disagree, breaking off into smaller more unified groups, or finding a confidant within the group to express frustrations.

Group Meals: Unidentifiable Slop or Authentic Cuban Experience

Because meals were included in the cost of the educational trip, students regularly ate breakfast and supper together at the hotel. The food was repetitive and generally unfamiliar to the students. While there was a surprising array of complaints about these hotel meals, which the authors viewed as more than adequate if uninspired, lunch posed the greatest obstacle for most of the students. After morning lectures at the University of Havana, the group ate at the University's Machado Student Cafeteria. For most of our group, lunch at the Machado was not a pleasant experience. The cafeteria was in a large dimly lit building where students lined up, picked up an indented tray and paused in front of several servers each of whom, as one student put it, slopped food onto the tray. Some of this food was identifiable, rice and a large bun often accompanied the meal, while some offerings withheld their identity under even the closest scrutiny.

Food, in general, and the student cafeteria, in particular, became a reoccurring and highly controversial issue particularly for the students in the 2008 group. Illustrative of one aspect of this issue was that some of the group would attract the cafeteria's stray cats by putting food on the floor and then make predictable comments that even the cats wouldn't eat this food. Other group members found such behaviour extremely disrespectful as their Cuban counterparts have little choice but to eat in the cafeteria given their financial circumstances.

The disagreement about how to cope with the lunches at the cafeteria quickly became a source of tension within the group. For many students, learning to appreciate the cafeteria experience stemmed from a liberal attitude about the world

wherein resources arise from good fortune: 'When we were eating with everyone in the cafeteria I thought about how fortunate we are to have all the wonderful food we do' (Jasmine, journal entry). Jennifer summarised the view of a subset of students who chose to eat at the cafeteria everyday, in solidarity with the Cubans, saying, 'I wasn't really sure what we were eating, but as the days went on the food seemed to be better, maybe because we were past the initial shock' (personal communication, October 2, 2008). Others simply opted out of the experience and bought lunch on their own, an avoidance strategy that simultaneously minimised their individual discomfort with the food and reduced the growing group tension that the lunch time issues provoked. This strategy, however, had the effect of avoiding the opportunity that this situation offered to discuss questions such as how the globe could be in a food crisis at the same time that those of us on the trip have year-round access to foods grown worldwide. The importance students placed on food offered an opportunity for exploring the differentiated effects of neoliberalism on a global scale and, yet, that opening was immediately closed by an almost imperceptible liberalism, which manifested as a desire for group harmony at all times and provided an example of how privilege enabled students to buy their way out of the discomfort of eating food that did not meet their standards.

Group Harmony: Togetherness through Separateness

The Cuban students from the Faculty of Foreign Languages (FLEX) who joined our group for afternoon cultural experiences and unscheduled time were an important part of the program. The number of Cuban students varied, as they often joined us between their classes or in the evening, but a core group of approximately eight students emerged. While the majority of students stated that the time spent with their Cuban counterparts constituted one of the most beneficial components of the trip, some students in each group were uncomfortable with the monetary issues that arose as a result of the fact that the Canadians had to cover the costs for the Cubans when they went out. One student in particular simply opted out of this socialising because of his discomfort with the economic disparity between the Cubans and Canadians. He did not know, he explained, where the line between charity and generosity or the line between necessity and advantage was to be drawn (Paul, personal communication, August 22, 2008).

The overwhelming sentiment of the group, however, was to spend as much time as possible with their Cuban peers. There were two different camps within this majority: those who found that the Cubans' experience, language ability, and sheer friendliness quelled their anxieties about being in an unfamiliar space, the social group, and those who thought that the daily outings with these students added greater nuance to their learning experience in Cuba, the more engaged group. The social group sought out similarities; this group was in search of peers who equally attended church, enjoyed music, and loved to dance. This group framed their

response to Cubans within an ideology of individual rights, for example, availability of food, quality of housing, and access to consumer products. However, they restricted their analysis of perceived inequities in Cuban life to hoping that circumstances in the country would change so as to improve the Cuban's access to consumer goods. This consumerist approach impeded the students from engaging in deliberation beyond recognising the challenges of daily life in Cuba, an admittedly difficult situation that we do not wish to underestimate. The common sentiment among this group was that Cubans were simultaneously different, but also similar in many ways. Maureen summarised, 'it was kind of interesting to see how we're so different but we're so similar at the same time' (personal communication, August 17, 2008).

Beyond recognising common ties between Cubans and Canadians, the more engaged group found their university counterparts to offer an additional source of information about everyday life in contemporary Cuba. Jennifer and Lorraine, for example, felt that the formal lectures delivered by university faculty members tended to gloss over concrete experiences and personal challenges of Cuban life and that these gaps could be filled during informal conversation with the Cuban students. Lorraine felt that she 'got the real truth from them' (personal communication, October 3, 2008). Caitlin underscored this sentiment by explaining how her relationship with one Cuban student allowed her 'to experience authentic aspects of their lives and to do and see things that most tourists would not' (Caitlin, journal entry). These interpersonal relationships between the Canadian and Cuban students did provide many with the opportunity to think more deeply about the Cuban reality. Caitlin wrote in her journal entry during the early days of our visit to Havana that it felt:

very refreshing to be in a developing country. I don't know quite what it is: maybe the people, the slower pace of life, the lack of modern architecture, the kids playing in the streets, the laundry hanging over the balconies, the heat. All of a sudden life felt so much less complex ... However, my initial impressions were challenged over the following days. The run down buildings may have seemed beautiful to me, and initially life may have appeared to be more simple, yet in reality I learned that life is a struggle every day for many Cubans and not so 'simple' (Caitlin, journal entry).

The culture shock, which first reinforced Caitlin's romantic views about developing nations, were disrupted through her everyday experiences with Cubans. She elaborated her frame of references and developed new ones, but stopped short of transformation. Untransformed according to Mezirow's (2008) four-point progression, the old and the new sit side by side in liberal harmony. Such liberalism opens students to new knowledges, making important first steps, but it is not itself a transformative agency.

Part II: Cuban Contradictions and Liberal Responses

Given the range of well-developed strategies the Canadian students had for dealing with interpersonal conflict and group stress, it is not surprising to find parallel res-

ponses in their engagement with the real and perceived contradictions within Cuban society more generally. The most often cited conflicts were the two-tiered system developing from Cuba's increasing tourist industry, the lack of economic reward for the more highly educated members of society, and the ever present promotion of the Cuban Revolution via city billboards, posters, and monuments. Students struggled with these aspects of Cuban society because they so clearly mismatch the neoliberal politics of North America wherein competition is understood as signifying freedom and wealth is said to be divvied up. Their response to these structures follows the same two liberal patterns of their interpersonal relationships: a distanced judgment of all that falls outside the boundaries of their Canadian sense of normalcy or a sympathetic but unengaged connection.

Cuban Tourism: Capitalism Meets Socialism

Even Bill, the most ardent defender of the Revolution, whose enthusiasm seemed endless, had little hope for Cuba's two-tiered economy. Because neoliberalism requires that resources be put to use on the open market, he argued that tourism itself cannot be the corrupting force. Instead, according to Bill, individuals who mistakenly believe they are more entitled than their fellow citizens are the problem. He underscored this belief, stating that:

the tourist industry is doing a lot for [Cubans]. But I just think that some things need to change in the sense where these people [i.e., Cubans involved in the tourist industry] that are making so much money are kind of getting this attitude where they think they're better than others... I don't think that tourists in themselves are doing bad by coming into Cuba and spending their money there. I think that's helping the economy but it's just that somehow there needs to be kind of like... a mentality change among those people who are making more money than the rest of them (personal communication, August 15, 2008).

While Bill converged with his peers in his assessment that tourism brought a much needed boost to the Cuban economy, he could only imagine tourism within the socialist structure of equal pay. Alternatively, his colleagues could imagine tourism solely within the competitive structure of free enterprise. Discussion of tourism, a topic that interested all students, could have been an opportunity to discuss economic beliefs if not for their strong commitment to avoiding disagreement. Again, we see the liberal culture of tolerance upholding the dominance of neoliberal practices such as privatisation and competition in the global marketplace.

Cuban Education: All Dressed Up with Nowhere to Go

Students were equally uncertain about how to evaluate an educational system that produced highly trained knowledge workers for a society that does not provide opportunities to profit from such training. By this they meant receiving sufficient financial compensation to ensure a standard of living above other less educated Cubans and more on par with their professional counterparts in Canada. While Cuba maintains an outstanding educational system throughout all its levels

(Carnoy, 2007), it faces a challenge to sustain many of its highly educated workers at least in the sense of providing jobs that correspond to their specialised training and/or education (Azicri, 2000; Carroll, 2010). Consequently, one might have a Ph.D, engineering or a medical degree and choose to drive a taxi where one can earn tips in convertible pesos, enabling the purchase of better quality food and other necessary goods.

In another variation of this chasm between the Cuban education system and the students' notions of the rewards associated with a successful career, Jennifer complained that 'even professors who have all this education and work so hard are very lucky if they get to go on vacation to a hotel' (personal communication, October 2, 2008). The students' concern that educated Cubans are undercompensated complements their frustration with those in the tourist industry as overcompensated. In both cases, the system does not calibrate according to the free market values of work and reward. As Wendy Brown (2003) explained, neoliberal philosophies do not define democracy as a:

set of independent political institutions and civic practices comprising equality, freedom, autonomy and the principle of popular sovereignty but rather, indicates only a state and subjects organised by market rationality (Brown, 2003: 9).

Market rationality not only defines the democratic state, it defines the dominant worldview of our students, making it very difficult for them to comprehend a society based on principles of equality and civic duty.

Public Space: Revolutionary Triumph or Marketing Scheme

For students, the ubiquitous public memorials to the revolution similarly highlighted the absence of market competition. Nearly all journals and several interviews addressed the lack of commercial advertisements that litter Canadian landscapes. Students tended to appreciate the less consumerist environment, but they also noted that the absence of commercial advertisements was compensated for by what they saw as pro-revolutionary political propaganda. Jordan, for instance, said his first impression of Cuba came as we drove late at night from the airport to our hotel: 'we drove past the President Bush is a Terrorista sign and it's like big propaganda and I thought, I hope this whole trip is not just going to be big propaganda thrown in your face' (personal communication, August 17, 2008).

There were others, however, who were unclear how they felt about marketing consumer products versus marketing the Revolution. Lorraine grappled with this, saying

I like certain things about it like with no advertisements in the streets... but then I'm still always trying to figure out why it is I like that. Are they trying to protect the people from the Western world and all their outside forces or are they just trying to maintain control? (personal communication, October 30, 2008).

Her efforts to define her personal position differentiates Lorraine from many of her classmates who see Cuba and Canada as distinct and unrelated societies, both

deracinated from their political, economic, and cultural histories. Paul best summarised this perspective when he identified Cuba and Canada as two independent, but equally valid, social formations: 'We have done what we've done and it's working for us. They've done what they've done. It's working for them' (personal communication, August 22, 2008). Certainly, Paul expresses a tolerant attitude that improves upon the conservative sentiment that Cuba ought to join the free market and open up the government to democratic elections, which prevails throughout the United States. And yet, Paul and the other participants on our trip are equally reticent to judge the U.S. embargo and other isolationist policies. The students unproblematically equated their liberal practices and neoliberal worldviews with democracy while simultaneously forestalling the more difficult democratic work of engaging difference. They expanded their knowledge base, but they did not transform that knowledge in part because they did not place varying beliefs in dialogue.

Finding the Transformative Potential of Short Term Study Abroad

Despite the pessimism expressed throughout this article about the debilitating impact of liberal and neoliberal ideology on the students' willingness or ability to engage deeply and critically with the many issues that Cuba poses, we recognise that a number of students were moved by the experience. Some students had their eyes opened in a way that can be characterised as a first important step. A number of students from the 2009 group gave expression to their new global awareness in a public forum where, with compelling conviction, several months after the trip, they presented their experiences to the university community. Further, Caitlin, a participant in the 2008 trip, made a public statement of the transformative potential of the Cuba experience. Her testimony on the trip's impact became part of a university public relations campaign stressing the benefits of study abroad. She said that her participation in the 2008 trip altered the direction of her personal and professional life. She is quoted in posters found around campus, as saying that her personal relationship with one of the Cuban students gave her access to family life and through many lengthy conversations she came to see something of 'the real Cuba.' As evidence of her commitment to broadening her horizons and her openness to new experiences, in 2009, the year following her participation in the Cuba trip, Caitlin completed a teaching practicum in South Africa and is now teaching overseas.

How truly transformational the experiences of these students are is difficult to assess. So, too, it is hard to judge how constrained their new perspectives are by the pervasive liberalism which infuses our collective consciousness. At the same time, we should not underestimate the significance of such opportunities for students. Indeed, their self-assessment provides us with reason to believe that short term study abroad experiences, organised on the bases of a transformative global education pedagogy, can trouble the dominant liberal world view of most students.

This observation raises a number of issues that can be summarised as three questions:

- What changes must be brought to bear on curriculum that will allow students to develop knowledge, skills, and values required to engage with difference be it at home or abroad?
- How can students be better prepared in the pre-departure stage to take full advantage of short term study abroad experiences?
- In what ways can short term study abroad experiences be better organised to take full advantage of in-country opportunities for transformative learning?

The answer to the first question involves long term reforms relating to ongoing efforts to infuse alternative pedagogies including global citizenship education into the curriculum, a topic that far exceeds the scope of this paper. More immediately, instructors engaged in the organisation of short term study abroad courses need to consider options such as, in the case of our Cuba program:

- Arranging home stays in 'casa particulares' (privately operated Bed and Breakfasts) rather than housing students in hotels. Arranging lodging at student homes would, under the circumstances prevailing in Cuba, be virtually impossible, but the possibility of utilising these B&Bs is practical. While they normally cater to tourists, in the authors' experience, they do offer a glimpse into Cuban home life and would provide students with authentic food, a look at daily household routines, and some knowledge of the immediate neighbourhood. Two students per house would ensure companionship and would allow for students to safely interact with Cuban culture first hand.
- Organising in-country time to debrief the day's events and identify issues that could provide the springboard to deliberation. Such sessions might well involve the participation of Cuban students. This could ensure input in these discussions from the perspective of the host culture. The presence of the Cubans would also oblige the Canadian students to engage more fully with the Cuban experience.
- Providing a course reader with articles addressing the key areas identified through past experiences as the reoccurring themes of potential student engagement. Such reading material could model engagement with different frameworks of knowledge and provide a springboard toward more focused deliberation. Rather than refusing to engage ideas, it may be that students do not have the critical tools for such engagement and selected readings could be discussed as issues, such as food availability, the effects of growing tourism, the Cuban education system, and the political economic structure, that arise through student experience.

- Other activities that could be considered would be to arrange for our students to sit in one or two regular classes in the subject area that they are studying at home and to take advantage of educational activities organised for the Cuban students (such as a forum that some of the students in the 2009 cohort attended on HIV/AIDS).

While the biggest impediment to engaging the students in a transformative learning experience remains ideological, the hold of liberal and neoliberal worldviews on student thinking, progressive educators understand that transformation can take place and we have a responsibility to our students to create the optimal circumstances for it to do so. A study abroad opportunity, especially one in a country like Cuba where liberal beliefs are challenged, offers a unique opportunity for students to explore their own modes of thinking and that of others.

Conclusion: Liberal Democracy and Its Limitations

Global education's insistence upon a world-minded perspective (Case, 1997: 76) frames our understanding of this trip and the students' responses to the Cuban context. According to global education scholarship, it is crucial that students become 'informed about the world in which they live and are provided with the skills to enable them to be active citizens and to understand how they can shape their own futures and make a difference' (Osler, 2002: 2). Recent study abroad scholarship stressed a similar perspective (Lewin, 2009). Because global education commits itself to the development of cosmopolitan worldviews and teaches democratic citizenship, it is not sufficient that students acknowledge the cultural and political chasms between the Canadian experience and that of their Cuban counterparts. The goal of global education is indeed to create citizens of the world who see the interconnectivity between these differences and their significance to the global landscape. Global education attempts to guard against the taken-for-granted assumptions and comfortable positions that isolate us from a range of diverse experiences across the globe. Coming to know these experiences a little better is a move in the right direction; however, as our students' liberal comments suggest, one can remain intellectually separate from an object of analysis even if that object is experienced up close and personally. Thus, this study begs many questions: When is one ready to engage others? How will you know how to do this if you are trained in disengaging? And what are the optimal conditions for transformative learning to take place during short term study abroad programs?

Despite these questions, we are optimistic that experiences, such as the one described in this study, do have a transformative educative potential. To increase our understanding of this potential it is important to study the impact of such experiences on participants over time; however, few longitudinal studies have been done. One exception to this is provided by Julia Balasis (1999) who twice inter-

viewed 15 students one and two years after an intensive 10 day social justice oriented study abroad experience in Mexico which she took part in.

Balaisis (1999) discovered, not surprisingly, and consistent with Dower (2008), that some students reported their time in Mexico as a life-changing experience which impacted their academic choices, their professional aspirations, and their values. By comparison, others reported that 'while meaningful and exciting at the time,' even within a year or two the memory of the trip 'had largely faded in scope, intensity and impact and had essentially receded into the landscapes of their ordinary lives' (Balaisis, 1999:189). On this point, Balaisis cites the observation of Jim, the resident Canadian facilitator at the Centre, who has worked with scores of student groups over the years. He commented that none of the people who organise student travel 'will ever know when a piece of the experience may surface positively in the lives of the former participants' (cited in Balaisis, 1999:192). Balaisis (1999:192-3) comments:

The routines of daily life consume all people, and for former program participants this reality causes a fading of the emotional impact of the original experience. Coming back to ordinary life and being consumed by day to day busy-ness makes activism quite improbable for most. Yet ... there is a low level awareness or subterranean unconsciousness that can spring to awareness in subtle or even grand ways when the need arises. Therein lies hope – that no experience is ever completely lost. Of course, a certain degree of 'fading' is not only common but appropriate since people cannot sustain the energy required for emotional peaks or unrelenting activity.

Both the students we interviewed and those interviewed by Balaisis (1999) commented on how moving they found their study abroad experiences. These students also commented on the impact they felt when they observed poverty in these countries and the resilience of the people in the face of that poverty. These moving experiences are not just emotional but can influence students intellectually and, as Balaisis (1999) noted with reference to the Catholic faith of the participants, spiritually as well. Nonetheless, however moved they might have been, the intensity of the experience will probably not, indeed according to Balaisis (1999), *cannot* be maintained. For most or all, the impact of the experience, faded though it may become, remains, perhaps subconsciously, a part of their life experiences.

Clearly a short study abroad experience, regardless of how well conceptualised and delivered, can't necessarily be expected to provide an immediate counterbalance to a lifetime of neoliberal influence both in and out of the classroom. Perhaps effective change in this regard will occur only when there is a critical mass of educators who practice transformative pedagogies which serve to ensure that all students, not just those lucky enough to participate in study abroad, have the opportunity to have their deeply held neoliberal convictions challenged and consider alternative world-views. In the meantime, however, opportunities such as those presented in this study, however rare, can and do create an opening in student thinking which, as Jim the Mexico facilitator commented, hold the potential to 'surface positively' at unexpected moments.

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Notes

1 All names, with the exception of the co-authors, are pseudonyms.

2 Interviews were not conducted following the 2009 trip, however, authors had permission to access journals and essays of this group relied upon frequent discussions in-country with the participants.

3 The authors wish to acknowledge the contribution of Kim Yielding, a Brock graduate student, who helped conduct several of the student interviews.

4 Cubans shared the discontent of the Canadians with respect to the food on offer. In the fall of 2009 students at the ISA, the Instituto Superior del Arte, staged a protest over the cafeteria food at their institution which, from the video clips available on the internet, look very familiar to what was on offer at the University of Havana cafeteria (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNmH1-lcv7A>).

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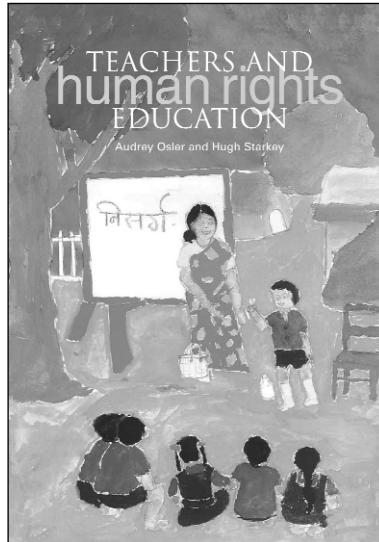
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