

TEACHING TO REMEMBER:
Memorials of repression in Argentina and the impact on students

PROFILES

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ABSTRACT

From 1976 to 1983, Argentina experienced the worst and most brutal dictatorship in its history. Since the return to democracy and in particular throughout the last few years, many actions have been undertaken to bring justice and initiate a process of collective memory on the terrible deeds of this last dictatorship.

This article is about the pedagogical challenges we face within the SIT Study Abroad program “Argentina Social Movements and Human Rights”, while trying to teach about this obscure period in history. While examining the impacts that the different types of memorials visited by our students have on their understanding of our history, we try to take students to different levels of analysis which can be summarized under the following four main ideas: 1. From Oversimplification to Thick Comprehension 2. From Horror to Hope, 3. From Particular to Global 4. From Foreign to Personal.

INTRODUCTION

While Argentina experienced a series of military coups between 1930 and 1976, the last dictatorship (1976-1983) proved far more violent than any other and marks an important rupture in Argentine history. An estimated 30,000 persons were disappeared¹ while 500 children were robbed from their disappeared mothers and often adopted by military families. The drastic and violent political and economic restructuring of the period surpassed that of all previous dictatorships the country had undergone.

This severity has led a vast number of Argentine citizens to say “*nunca más*” (never again); antiauthoritarian sentiments have grown and nowadays most citizens firmly believe in democracy. These sentiments, coupled with a lack of international support for military uprisings, have led to the longest democratic period in the history of Argentina from 1983 to today.

¹ Disappearance represented a central aspect of the dictatorship’s repressive apparatus. Individuals were secretly kidnapped, imprisoned and killed while loved ones were denied any information regarding their whereabouts. Most of the bodies have yet to be found.

The last dictatorship continues to play a central role in the way Argentines see their nation and formulate their national identity. The forms and foci of collective and official narratives of this traumatic past not only influence meanings of national identity, but also understandings of current human rights concerns and the nation's present and future trajectory (Jensen, 2009). Debates still surge over what form the collective memory of this traumatic past should take. These debates manifest themselves in decisions regarding the commemoration of dates, trials of former oppressors, establishments of sites and museums of memory, artworks such as murals and memorials, and its role in public education.

The School for International Training's (SIT) study abroad program "Argentina: Social Movements and Human Rights" presents the challenge of how to teach about human rights, social movements and memory to students that encounter Argentine history for the first time.

In 2010 we focused on understanding the importance of experiential learning when teaching about collective memory. After site visits and field observations, students participated in oral group debriefings and provided individual written responses about their experiences. This information has been a useful tool to reflect as a team² about our own approach to this sensitive topic.

This paper synthesizes our reflections and gathers not only our debates as a team but also incorporates direct quotes from students that participated in the program in 2010. It seeks to build upon debates surrounding the pedagogy of memory with special emphasis on the case of study abroad students. We present experiential learning as a key element to a full comprehension of the complexity of collective memory.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY

In our discussion of memory, we refer not to an individual's habitual or subconscious memory, but to an active memory socially constructed through the interaction, dialog and debate between groups (Jelin, 2000). Here personal memories intertwine with collective rememberings of the past as distinct actors battle for the incorporation and legitimization of their memories of past events (Kaiser, 2005). These memory struggles become increasingly intense when the memory reflects collective experiences of severe repression. The inclusion of individual and/or group memories in the collective remembrance also demonstrates a cultural method through which a sense of belonging is created, especially for silenced and oppressed groups (Jelin, 2000).

During the last century, many academics have studied the formation and role of collective memory as well as the function of state and societal actors in the memory-making process. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) first introduced the term collective memory, in contrast with individual memory, to refer to memory constructed by a group in 1950.

Collective memories are constantly subject to and (re)defined by the shifting contemporary political realities of that particular time and place. How we envision the

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past has much to do with how we see the present and, at the same time, how we see the present has to do with how we see the past. Actors and communities struggle to reconstruct collective memories and mark how society imagines this traumatic past in order to define the values of contemporary society. In these ways, memory has potent political power. Jelin (2003), Nora (1989) and Edkins (2003), among others, have highlighted the highly political nature of collective memory construction because of the interplay of state and civil actors, and the power imbued through the inclusion and exclusion of events, dates, sites and memories into official narratives.

In Argentina – as in all other places of the world – collective memory is not homogeneous. The coexistence of different views about the past is recognizable even in the naming of that time period. Do you call it a dictatorship? A legitimate government? A process of national reorganization? Were the disappearances part of a genocide or a “Dirty War”? Even though there has been growing consciousness about the need to make sure such horror never occurs again, a myriad of views continues to exist. Some more controversial societal sectors consider it an admirable period in history or a necessary evil to avoid national chaos or the spread of communism.

As time goes on, the debate about how to treat this traumatic past continues. Even those that consider it a sad moment in Argentine history might propose to “forget” and instead look towards the future. In contrast, those who support politics of memory argue that the desire to forget and “move on” bears the risk of repeating history.

TEACHING MEMORY THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

As a program about social movements and human rights in Argentina, it is important for us not only to teach about the past but also to understand its legacy today.

Our pedagogic proposal is to learn through experiencing and analyzing different memory channels. Classes and readings are complemented with movies, visits to memorial sites, and observations of commemorative marches. In debriefing activities organized after these visits, it is not only the intellectual comprehension that matters; the feelings that these activities generate are also key in reflection and understanding.

Students visit a variety of memorials and work to bring into dialog the different manifestations of memory they experience. When students are faced with different sites of memory and commemorative marches it leads to a discussion about the meaning of memory and an internalization of its importance.

In the following paragraphs, we present a short description of the sites of memory and commemorative marches integrated into the experiential learning of the program before our subsequent analysis of student reactions to these experiences.

The system of state terrorism of the last dictatorship had at its core the use of *centros clandestinos de detención, tortura y exterminio* (clandestine centers of detention, torture and extermination)³ in which sequestered persons were tortured and often disappeared.

³ The Instituto Espacio para la Memoria recognizes the existence of roughly 500 former clandestine centers in Argentina. These clandestine torture and detention centers were never officially recognized by the military junta.

Today, the human rights community has succeeded in expropriating some former centers to transform them into sites of memory. Each new expropriation sparks a discussion about how and what we should remember. While most of these sites are supported by the government, they are managed by boards composed of human rights activists, formerly disappeared persons, community members and the families of the disappeared. Because these sites serve as undeniable markers of the traumatic past they have become a central pillar of the human rights community's fight for truth, memory and justice.

The former torture and detention centers the students visit have included the Escuela Superior de Mécánica de la Armada (ESMA), Olimpo and Mansion Seré. The sites of memory we visit vary widely in how they address these traumatic legacies. ESMA, as the largest detention center used during this period, is emblematic of official accounts of the dictatorial past. It holds the Museum of Memory with a variety of cultural events while it also offers guided visits that highlight the horrors of the dictatorship's repression. The large size of the premises of ESMA allows for a diversity of uses. Much to the surprise of the uninformed visitor, the grounds of ESMA, with its greenery and striking buildings, presents a beautiful landscape. At Olimpo, a large and open parking garage, the structures of the holding cells have been demolished, yet the rest of the building remains intact and in disrepair. In comparison with ESMA, the guided tours at Olimpo shy away from emphasizing the horrors and prefer to recount the lives and activism of the disappeared before they were kidnapped and tortured. Finally, with Mansion Seré the entire building was demolished and the space now holds a recreational sports center. However, the frame of the building has been reconstructed and the House of Memory and Life was installed in 2000, the first of its kind in Latin America. The House of Memory and Life provides a space for the promotion of truth, justice and memory and is also the headquarters of the municipal human rights department..

Depending on the time of year, students also have the opportunity to observe commemorative marches on March 24 or September 16.

March 24 is the anniversary of the coup that brought the military junta to power in 1976. The nature of the "March of the 24th" has changed throughout the years in terms of who participates, the demands made by social and political movements,⁴ and in how these groups relate to the government. In 2006, March 24 was declared a national holiday.

Another commemorative date that students can sometimes attend is *La Noche de los Lápicos* (The Night of the Pencils). September 16, 1976 marked the beginning of a series of kidnappings of ten high school students who had been protesting for increased student benefits such as lowered bus fare. In the following months the students were illegally detained, tortured, raped and the majority murdered.

Today groups and individuals stage large marches on September 16 and March 24 to remember these important dates that are seen as representing the horrors of the last dictatorship. These marches are supported by the current government and are not seen as protests but as commemorative acts. Families, organizations and individuals attend as a way to manifest their will to "never forget."

⁴ In Argentina, social and political movements utilize anniversary marches as a platform to make other demands on contemporary society.

In addition to the activities mentioned above, every semester the students visit different human rights organizations fighting for memory. The mothers of Plaza de Mayo and the two different organizations that represent them are an international icon of the fight for human rights in Argentina. Students often describe their visits with these strong elderly women as one of the strongest experiences of the semester.

But, why is experience important when we study collective memory?

Through exposure to readings and lectures, students have a better factual and descriptive understanding of this dark period in Argentine history. Although analytical discussions are encouraged throughout class lectures and presentations, it is only through alternative and emotionally impacting forms of teaching such as visiting memorial sites that students acquire a much more personal and analytical view of what happened. Direct exposure to spaces and peoples marked by Argentina's traumatic past usually generates emotions that spark a strong desire from students to try to better understand what happened.

Likewise, their understanding of why it is important to remember is enriched:

“Seeing the photos of the disappeared and those that were tortured in Mansion Seré was a difficult experience. The impact of reading about it is so different than to go where things happened. I think that it is very good that this place is both a negative and bad place that now is transformed into something positive because there is a human rights organization with a museum that is an instrument for education.”

“The visit to Mothers was very impressive. Because we remembered that those women are real people. They are still alive and they have not made up their stories. [Their] stories [are] not imagined. And in them we see the effects of age in their slow pace, wrinkles in their faces and we remember how they have devoted these past 32 years to this cause.”

“Before in my visits to other sites, I could not feel close to the cause of the Mothers. I thought it was impossible for me to understand because I am not Argentinean and in the USA there is not a strong sense of collective memory. But yesterday when they talked to us I could understand the pain of the nation during the dictatorship through the words of those four mothers. I think we have to hear about the pain and see the strength of these mothers to understand collective memory because they are the symbols of a lost generation, the relics of the fight against the dictatorship.”

In all these quotes like in others we will examine later on, we can see how learning about the dictatorship, outside the classroom and in a more experiential way, is a necessary mobilizing process for students to feel closer to the struggle for memory and human rights. These students come from a different country, with a different history and have had a different socialization process. These differences pose some barriers that have to be overcome to enable a deeper level of understanding and commitment from students to the topic of study.

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF A TRAGIC PAST

Teaching about a tragic past is a difficult task, especially if it is recent. Moreover, by working with North American students we encounter different pedagogical and cultural challenges than we would face teaching these topics to Argentine students.

Below, we discuss some of the more recurrent challenges while also presenting the highlights and opportunities these challenges present in experiential learning of collective memory.

1. From Oversimplification to Thick Comprehension

Foreign students visiting Argentina for the first time normally have little to no previous knowledge of the last Argentine dictatorship. They are largely unaware of the tensions and contrasting social interpretations that exist regarding this period. Unlike Argentine students, they have no friends or relatives who have socialized them to see (or not see) this period in Argentine history in a particular way. Students lack a direct emotional engagement with the topic before arrival. Thus to some extent, it could be argued that they approach the topic from a more “neutral” perspective.

With visits to sites of memory, students usually become more aware of the facts and feelings of the human rights violations that occurred there. But without reflection and debriefing their responses often remain full of oversimplifications of the events, trauma and context of the last dictatorship. While foreign students may have a more “neutral” perspective, their different socializations and cultural backgrounds often cause them to miss important nuances.

The challenge is to help students move beyond oversimplifications and reach a “thick comprehension” of collective memory and human rights violations. Here we build on the term “thick description” as conceptualized by Geertz (1992). Geertz argues that the ethnographer has to reach what he calls a “thick description” of human behavior. He defines it as the capacity to explain not just the behavior, but its context as well, so that the behavior becomes meaningful to the outsider.

Building on his conceptualization, we argue that we have to help students reach a “thick comprehension.” We define thick comprehension as the capacity to understand the facts, feelings and impacts of a particular moment, to understand its historical context and complexity, and to comprehend the meanings of that moment for different actors. We believe that in order to reach a thick comprehension students must be exposed to and reflect upon different stimuli and perspectives.

As an initial reaction, some students tend to view Argentine people in a negatively exotic, demonized way. Some frequent questions they pose are: Why did they let it happen? Why didn't they stop it? “Luckily we did not experience something like that in the US,” is also a frequent relieved reaction they express. Within this same line of thinking, when students visit the former clandestine centers, they notice that these centers existed in highly urban areas and question why and how the surrounding communities did not denounce the human rights violations they witnessed. For example, with the visit to Mansion Seré some expressed:

“I can’t understand how this clandestine center was in such a nice place like Morón. It looks like a quiet place but terrible things have happened in the past. People that lived outside the clandestine center knew what was happening. Perhaps they did not know how terrible it was but they must have known what was going on. The people that lived in Morón should have done something about it.”

“It is interesting to see that Mansion Seré was not a secret, it was in a street with a lot of traffic. In other words it was a way to tell people that if they were not allied with the government, they could be in that center.”

In the second comment we can see how a student was able to reach a thicker comprehension of the prevailing state of fear during this time period. Comprehending what it means to live in a “state of terror” is central to understanding how people could stay silent and understand the heroism of those who did speak up. By discussing such a reaction, we encourage students to reflect upon human rights violations they have witnessed and why they did or did not take action.

A thick comprehension of events negates the construction of a bipolarized world where groups, persons or nations are categorized as intrinsically good or evil. Finding and understanding the reasoning behind actions is much more fruitful than oversimplifications or judgement.

2. From Horror to Hope

All traumatic events include violent acts, though the magnitude may vary. Understanding the nature of the violence is central to the comprehension of the historical period. However, pedagogical dilemmas emerge over how to and to what extent include violence when teaching about traumatic events. Is it a central aspect? Is horror a way to lead to deeper engagement with the topic or a way to reify and transform it into a tourist attraction? Does the retelling of horror allow for the oversimplification, materialization and consumption of the traumatic past? Does it help or hinder a deeper understanding of the tragic past and acts of violence?

Visiting clandestine centers and observing marches does help generate a more reflective type of learning for students. Teachers must carefully accompany this process so that students do not deviate from the main learning objectives planned in such visits. Some students do tend to get trapped in collecting the more descriptive and horrific details of a visit to a former clandestine detention center without reflecting beyond the specificities of the horror. The challenge is to help students transcend this level to a broader understanding.

As stated before, each site of memory has developed its own strategies of remembrance which may or may not highlight the horror of the period. During the visits, some students feel frustrated if they are unable to visit the actual rooms where torture occurred. Some demonstrate disappointment if they do not see tears in the eyes of a mother of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. In our visits to Mansion Seré many students often feel cheated or disillusioned by the visit because the building where the horrors occurred was demolished.

It is important for students to understand that the objective is not to collect a series of terrifying anecdotes to take back home. Instead, it is to see how horror can be

transformed into something positive through collective memory and the politics of memory. The pairing of visits to sites of memory with observations of commemorative marches has helped in the pedagogical challenge of pushing from horror to hope.

A frequent reaction students express while participating in marches in remembrance of the dictatorship (24th of March or September 16, *La Noche de los Lápices*) is the possibility of looking forward in a more positive way. The following quote expresses the very particular feelings one of our students encountered while participating in the “March of the 24th,” yet this type of reaction has been frequently expressed by other students as well.

“The March of the 24th was not a mourning of the disappeared but more a celebration of their lives. Music could be heard throughout the entire march through singing and drumming. Dancing also accompanied this. Bright colors were worn by different groups and organizations.

The fact that the march emphasized the lives of the disappeared has completely changed how I have felt these past few weeks being in Argentina. The history of the dictatorship and the human rights abuses that occurred have left me with disgust and sadness about being here. The fact that there was impunity and there exists little to no remorse. The march made me very emotional and proud that Argentineans were celebrating their loved ones and bringing them to life again.”

Students often feel relieved by the fact that they see thousands of people in the streets, demanding justice for what happened, and mobilizing jointly in order to pressure the government to address past and present human rights violations. Some students mention experiencing more “hope” and a feeling of “reconciliation with the country.” Frequently students express surprise and satisfaction that the current Argentine government recognizes the crimes against humanity the last dictatorship produced.

“...I believe that it is very important that Argentine people remember the dictatorship and its consequences. I like the fact that different government organizations are teaching young generations about the dictatorship and human rights...Even though the dictatorship was terrible, nobody must ignore it. We have seen it in the march of La Noche de los Lápices and its anniversary. What happened in the dictatorship is a reminder to us that democracy and human rights are not always easy to obtain.”

From a pedagogical perspective we have to be aware of ethical issues involved and use the description of horror only as a way to reach thick comprehension and lead to hope for a different future.

3. From Particular to Global

The challenge of teaching about human rights and human rights violations within a particular country case study is the tendency to ignore both the role of the international context in the atrocities and the parallels with violence seen in other countries. The pedagogical dilemma becomes not only moving from descriptive or horrific understandings to thick comprehension, but also to move beyond the particularities of the case study and comprehend the topics from a broader perspective. This global perspective should allow the student to comprehend that a multiplicity of factors lead to human rights violations around the world.

It is crucial to see the case of Argentina as neither isolated nor as the result of an intrinsically violent or less civilized culture. While teaching students about the American and international support for the last dictatorship might be disconcerting, acknowledging international factors allows for a more realistic and mature view of political power and how crimes against humanity come to pass.

Confronting students with emotive experiences in the learning process helps trigger a wider understanding of how and why human rights abuses occur. Once students develop skills to understand the Argentine case, they are better able to see and understand other parts of the world. Students often begin to question: What is the role of memory in the construction of a country? What are the factors that allow human rights violations to happen? With this global perspective students often begin to re-reflect on known international cases including the Holocaust, Rwanda, or Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. A more “global” view leads students to better comprehend human rights violations from a world perspective.

4. From Foreign to Personal

When students participate in a multitudinous and colorful memorial march, they ask themselves about its nature and compare it to their own marches back home. How come such young people who had nothing to do with the dictatorship participate so fervently and passionately in these marches? How can a commemorative march also be a political act through which to look at current political and human rights claims? Why does this not happen in the United States? What does Memorial Day mean to us as Americans? These types of questions come up spontaneously and lead to illuminating discussions as students bring experiential learning in Argentina into dialog with their personal experiences back home.

However, it is interesting to note a pedagogical challenge here as we find our North American students more easily shaken by the violation of civil and political human rights than by the violation of economic, social and cultural rights. Because of tendencies in socialization and academic formation in the United States, our students often hold a subconscious naturalization and greater “comfortability” with a lack of access to the so-called second generation rights⁵ and therefore take less critical views on their own present and past governments regarding these issues. Students, for example, more readily critique US government human rights violations in Guantanamo Bay than the lack of health care access or the unemployment rate. This further proves an important challenge as the human rights violations of the last dictatorship also highlight civil and political rights violations. By utilizing references in marches and sites of memory to economic, social and cultural rights in contemporary Argentina we attempt to call attention to basic principles intrinsic to the concept of human rights: their universal, interdependent, indivisible and non-hierarchical character.⁶ Observation of

⁵ Nowadays, many human rights practitioners and theorists refuse to define rights in terms of first and second generation rights. However this definition originated when the main human rights instruments were founded after World War II and through the Cold War. First generation rights were defined as political and civil rights whereas second generation rights were defined as economic, social and cultural rights.

⁶ Universality means human rights belong to everyone, everywhere, by virtue of being human, without regional differences. The indivisibility and interdependence of human

anniversary marches presents an important opportunity for students to witness the strong invocation of current human rights claims.

“La Noche de los Lápices and its march is not only a commemoration of what happened back in 1976. There were also groups of people claiming rights for GLBT minorities, the rights of students, the rights of workers...High school students were very active participants in this march. Some were painting, some were singing, some were holding posters, and nobody was stopping them from doing this. I think that it is great that young people want to fight to accomplish these changes. In the USA, young people are not involved in politics, there is a lack of inspiration and this worries me.”

The student recognizes the coexistence in these marches of the events of 1976 and the fight for rights today. Bringing past problems to the present is a central objective in teaching human rights to students. But, after this parallel, she also reflects on her own involvement in human rights. So this learning opportunity sparks in her important personal questions about her own experience and involvement in the fight for human rights in the United States.

In order to accomplish our learning objectives for the “Argentina: Social Movements and Human Rights” study abroad program, we encourage a more critical analysis from the part of the student on the personal level. Knowing about the involvement of the US government in the dictatorships in Latin America should not lead to shame or resentment. It should instead be a first step to dialog and discussion about the role of political power in the globe. Being critical of the involvement of their government in different international conflicts is necessary to building dedicated citizens willing to “make this world a better place to live.”

These experiences help them to see human rights and collective memory as not static but as truly alive, being constantly redefined and reconstructed by context. This malleability also highlights the role each one of us can play in the fight for human rights and collective memory.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS

In this paper we outlined some of the challenges in the pedagogy of human rights and collective memory. How do we help students reach a more profound comprehension of complex phenomenon? How do we avoid simplistic analyses of traumatic pasts? How do we relate memory with human rights today?

We stated that experiential learning is a central part of overcoming these challenges, but it is not enough. First-hand experience can lead to new risks such as an overemphasis on the emotive response or horrific specifics. While deeper understanding requires a description of past events and the related horrors, the primary pedagogical challenge is to push the student beyond emotion and horror to analysis. Through guided reflection and debriefing, experiential learning can pass to a thick comprehension that allows for a more profound understanding of how human rights are violated today. And if we want memory to cause positive change for human rights today, we must then also bring this thick comprehension and analysis to a personal and present level.

rights means that civil and political, economic, social and cultural rights are all interrelated and utterly equal in importance. They form an indivisible whole.

We understand this to be a long learning process that does not begin when they arrive nor does it end when they leave. Each student brings with them a composite of thoughts, values, and ideologies that impact their interpretations of what they feel and learn. Leaving the country with more questions than answers might be a good sign of thick comprehension.

As stated in the frame of reference, memory has important political implications. By remembering some events we define what we do not want but also how we envision the future. Because memory touches upon not only past atrocities but current human rights abuses it presents an excellent opportunity through which to revise and redefine the human rights agenda today.

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