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A Group Leader's Journey: Connecting Youth Development, Youth Empowerment and Social Justice Theory to Practice on The Experiment in International Living

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Justice Theory to Practice on The Experiment in International Living

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Author Note

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Abstract

Youth development practitioners must be cognizant not only of youth development and social justice education theories, but also of how they—in the context of their lived experiences—engage with youth development work. My initial experiences with youth development lacked intentionality; however, as I began to critically examine my own experiences through the lens of theorists such as Freud, Piaget, Ericksen, hooks, and Freire, I realized the vitality of reflective practice. This paper unpacks my experiences as a Group Leader for The Experiment in Argentina, Nicaragua/Cuba, and South Africa, analyzing my approach to the Group Leader role and how it affected my participants' experiences. The body of theories that I incorporate into this analysis include youth development, youth empowerment and social justice education as they not only build upon each other but are also not mutually exclusive in that a youth practitioner must consider all three in this work. In this process of self-actualization as an educator, I not only incorporate theory into practice but also identify my strengths and areas of improvement in my youth development work moving forward.

Terminology and Abbreviations

The Experiment – Refers to The Experiment in International Living, a program of World Learning

SIT – Refers to The School for International Training, also referred to as SIT Graduate Institute

YPLD – Refers to Youth Program Leadership & Design, a course taught by Dr. John Ungerleider and Simon Norton at SIT Graduate Institute

TDEL – Refers to Training Design for Experiential Learning, a course taught by Ryland White at SIT Graduate Institute

TOT – Refers to Training of Trainers: Ethics & Intercultural Training, a course taught by Ryland White at SIT Graduate Institute

TSA – Refers to Training for Social Action, a course taught by Ryland White at SIT Graduate Institute

Experimenters – Refers to participants on The Experiment in International Living programs

TFI – Refers to The Fellowship Initiative, a mentoring program as part of JPMorgan Chase & Co's corporate responsibility arm. The Fellowship Initiative provides intensive academic and leadership training to help young men of color from economically-distressed communities complete their high school educations and better prepare them to excel in colleges and universities. TFI is part of the firm's broader ongoing efforts to provide adults and young people with the education, skills and resources that contribute to greater economic mobility. (JPMorgan Chase & Co, 2018)

Group Leader – Each Experiment group is accompanied by two expertly-trained adult leaders. Student health and safety are each group leader's top priorities (World Learning, 2018)

Introduction

My work with youth, particularly high school students, began during my time serving as a

Peace Corps Volunteer in Honduras. As a Health-Extensionist volunteer, I was tasked with

delivering not only sex education as it pertained to HIV/AIDS prevention, but also a youth

development and life-skills related curricula centered around empowerment (goal setting, role

models, etc.). This experience with my Honduran students served as the impetus for my interest

in youth development work, not only in practice, but in theory. The nature of Peace Corps

training is practical in that it provides sourcebooks, workshop manuals, curricula, and activity

plans designed for a specific population. Your task, as a volunteer, is to deliver this material in a

way that is effective and engaging. My volunteer training consisted of a very practical

methodology of reviewing the manual and participating in the activities and simulations acting as

both a student and a trainer. This type of training, I learned later at SIT, is deemed TOT

(Training of Trainers) or in simplistic terms, teaching participants how to teach. Contextually,

this seemed practical, effective and streamlined: teach the volunteers the material and how to

deliver it. But as I discovered later during my time at SIT, there was an inherent disconnect

between the theory and its practice. As Peace Corps Volunteers, we were learning the methods of

delivery, but not the theory behind how and why this training material was designed. Moreover,

there was no focus or discussion on how we, as individuals and as trainers, were engaging with

and approaching the material in the context of our own experiences.

This disconnect became apparent to me during my time as a student at SIT, specifically in

the courses Training Design for Experiential Learning (TDEL) Training of Trainers (TOT) and

Youth Program Leadership Design (YPLD). The particular work emphasized and sometimes

required personal dissection of one's individual relationship to the material or subject matter in

relation to its delivery and our students' or participants' experience with the material. In my initial development as an educator, I had never been asked to engage with any material in such a way. This experience was challenging, emotional, and markedly changed my approach with students as a result.

Reflecting on my past work as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I discovered a baseline or a jumping off point from which to improve both my approach as an educator and as a youth development practitioner. It is this transformation and reflection that I wish I explore in the following pages. I am drawn to the words of bell hooks (1994) in her discussion of progressive education or "engaged pedagogy." She writes "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being, if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (p. 15). I hope to integrate theory into my practice as an educator and youth development practitioner using not only youth development, empowerment and social justice theory, but also the organizational policies and practices that are utilized as a Group Leader in the field with The Experiment. Currently, I am in a unique position in that I have experienced a 360-degree view of Experiment programs, from serving as a group leader on the ground with students to working as an integral part of the On-Call team managing risk and health of students on program while also coaching group leaders on issues of group dynamics and managing students on their overseas programs. Moreover, I have also been on both sides during Leader Training Week as a participant and as a full-time staff member.

This examination of my work as an educator and a youth development practitioner will concentrate on my approach to and engagement with this work for The Experiment from a Group Leader's perspective. This will be supported by my analysis of program evaluations (from staff, co-leaders, partners etc.), self-evaluations and reflections on my varying experiences as well as

student feedback from these programs to flesh out my evolution as an educator. I will also reference my coursework in YPLD and integrate educational theories from my training courses completed at SIT (TDEL specifically) to provide a comprehensive analysis of myself as a youth development practitioner and more specifically on how my work with The Experiment in International Living has shaped this evolution. To do this, I will connect theory to in the field work on Experiment programs in two ways both reflecting on my work as Group Leader through my participants experiences as well as my own, as well as relating this feedback to youth development, empowerment and social justice education theory.

The Experiment

History

The Experiment has been offering transformational study abroad experiences for high school students for 85 years. At its outset in 1932, it's goal was simply stated: "in a word, the purpose is to start an experiment in international living" (Watt, 1967, p. 93), to "learn to live together by living together" (Watt, 1967, p. 161). Donald Watt, the founder, hoped to improve international understanding in a time of increased inward thought, particularly on the American front. Moreover, at the time, in the early 1930s, another impending world conflict, WWII, was brewing. Wallace (1996) writes "newspapers, books and magazines wondered in print how soon the next major conflict would begin, They did not have long to wait" (p. 1) and Peters (1957) expands Watt's conviction that the "understanding is needed most where misunderstanding is greatest" (p. 216). Watt endeavored to do this not only by traveling and experiencing a different culture with U.S. High School students but also through homestays with local families as the family was "the basic unit of a country's culture; it was here that the child learned not only the speech of his land, but it manners, customs, morals, ideas and ideals" (Peters, 1957, p.76).

Wallace (1966) expounds on this "the idea was that when a young person from one nation had a carefully prepared experience living as a member of a family in another nation, the result was highly significant to that individual's personal educational growth" (p. 37). The Experiment was a pioneer in that it was the first to provide and recognize the value of a home-stay component in the field of study abroad programming.

The first group of Experimenters traveled to Germany in 1932., Since then the number of programs has grown to over 30 in more than 20 countries. These programs consist of 3, 4 and 5-week summer abroad programs for high school students. The programs have gone through various iterations throughout the organization's history, from au pair programs, to in-bound programs, to semester abroad college programs offering academic credit all while adjusting to world and country conflicts as needed. Often, The Experiment has been at the forefront in international relations, attempting to spread peace through understanding, a mantra directly in line with the foundation of the US Peace Corps. The Peace Corps, founded in 1961, in its early years was directed by R. Sargant Shriver, the architect and founder, and an American outbound Experimenter in the 1930s. As a result of his experience and the traction and expansion that The Experiment was gaining not only in the field of academia, but also in language learning, Shriver invited the Experiment and its president Gordon Boyce to train the first Peace Corp Volunteers bound for East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and Gabon. This training included instruction in the host language as well as significant pre-departure preparation and intercultural training, marking The Experiment's first language intensive training program and would lay the groundwork for lasting partnership between the Peace Corps, The Experiment and World Learning, the parent organization of The Experiment.

Today

Today, The Experiment still remains committed to Donald Watt's vision at its founding 85 years ago of "enabling our students to explore the world in a personal, meaningful way and to develop new, enduring friendships through hands-on cultural experiences and homestays" (World Learning, 2018). The Experiment is not only able to maintain but also innovate its programming due to a large and comprehensive network of international partners all over the globe. These partnerships are a combination of SIT Study Abroad programs that offer accredited academic semester abroad programs for college students, as well as global World Learning partners.

The Experiment is able to leverage these partnerships to implement innovative and timely programs with a thematic focus. These thematic programs not only set The Experiment apart from competitors in the industry but also provide another aspect to the experiential education approach. These programs engage students on current issues that are not only relevant to the program country but also to their current everyday lives. Here, the learning is circular as the educational philosophy indicates. The current theme offerings are language & cultural discovery, arts & social change, sustainability & the environment, and peace, politics & human rights. The *Group Leader Handbook* (2016) explains:

> Thematic workshops, discussions, and trainings are provided throughout the
> program to provide a foundation and framework for understanding how the theme
> plays out in a social, economic, and cultural context, students will explore and
> understand the contemporary opportunities and challenges facing the country
> through a critical and conversational lens (p. 21).

These thematic foci provide a structure and a central point of learning for these program as well as a way to engage with the culture on a more profound and personal level, drawing on particular interests and passions from students and how these play out in a different culture.

Participants

The Experiment ranks at the top in terms of diversity of participants in high school study abroad programming "maintaining the broadest socioeconomic, racial, ethnic and geographic diversity" in our students. (World Learning, 2018). Moreover, the organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion is supported by a large network of partners and financial contributors that ensure the recruitment of amazing young people from all over the world. In 2017, The Experiment sent a total of 513 students abroad. They came from 37 U.S. states and 11 countries. 73% of participants were awarded financial aid, either applying directly to The Experiment for funding or through partnerships. It is not only in geographic and socioeconomic diversity that the Experiment stands out. It is also in the racial diversity. The racial makeup of Experiment participants can be seen below:
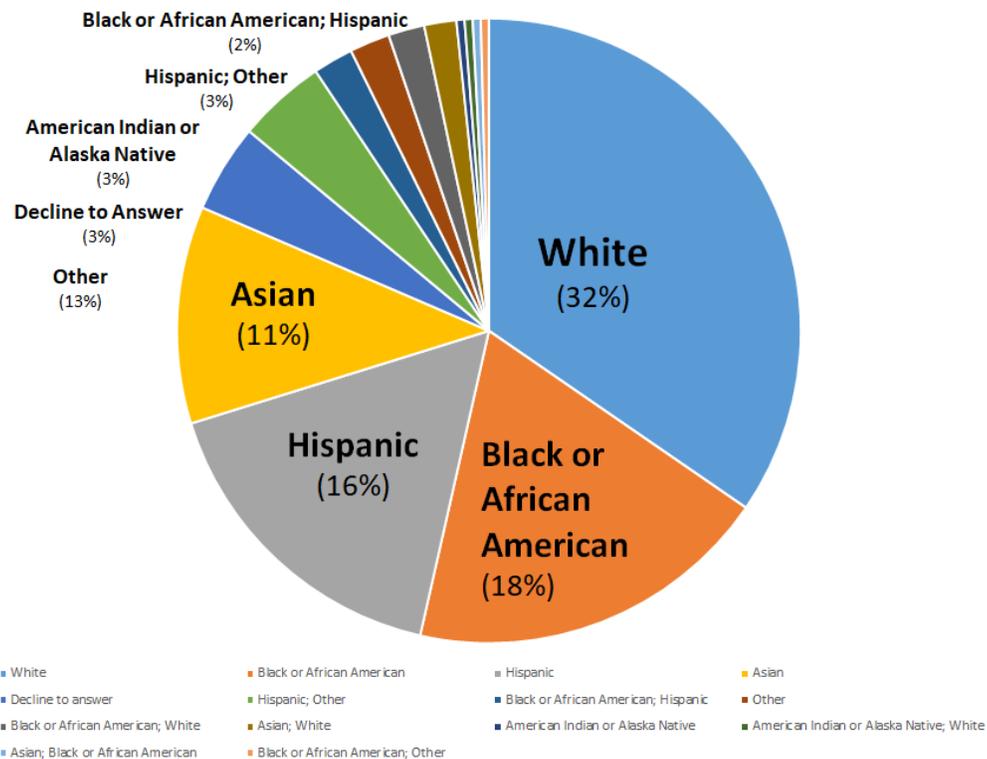
Figure 1: Racial Makeup of Participants (World Learning, 2017)

When compared to the National Association of Foreign Student Advisor's statistics, seen below,

Race/Ethnicity	U.S. Postsecondary Enrollment 2015-2016	U.S. Students Abroad 2015-2016
African American or Black	14.1%	5.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	6.8%	8.4%
Caucasian	57.6%	71.6%
Hispanic/Latino American	17.3%	9.7%
Multiracial	3.5%	3.9%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.8%	0.5%

Figure 2: Percent of U.S. Study Abroad Students by Race/Ethnicity (NAFSA, 2015-2016)

The Experiment sends more students abroad in comparison to college students that self-identify as African American (18% vs 14.1%) as well as more students that identify as Asian (11% vs. 6.8%). Although NAFSA reports on U.S college students studying abroad, the comparison is quite poignant in this context as it illustrates not only The Experiment's commitment to diversity in terms of pedagogy, but also in practice. Providing transformational study abroad experiences to such a diverse group of students only increases the learning and empowerment development of Experiment participants. bell hooks in *Teaching Community, A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003) reflects "diversity in speech and in presence can be fully appreciated as a resource enhancing any learning experience"(p. 45). The Experiment's pedagogy embraces this diversity in all aspects of its programming.

Structure of Programs

Experiment Programs are divided into 4 different components: Orientation, Homestay, Thematic Focus and Reflection (World Learning, 2018). Programs are constructed in a way that provides building blocks for student independence, increased confidence, decision making and

an overall sense of empowerment. These components build on each other, allowing for the

progression of challenges with support. Students are encouraged to seek out and explore

opportunities for independence and group leadership during all components. (*Group Leader*

Handbook, 2016, p.24). Moreover, the structure of these programs also follows Kolb's (1984)

Experiential Learning model. This process suggests that knowledge is created not only from

experience - learning by doing - but also by reflection of these experiences and targeting the

learning that comes from these reflections..
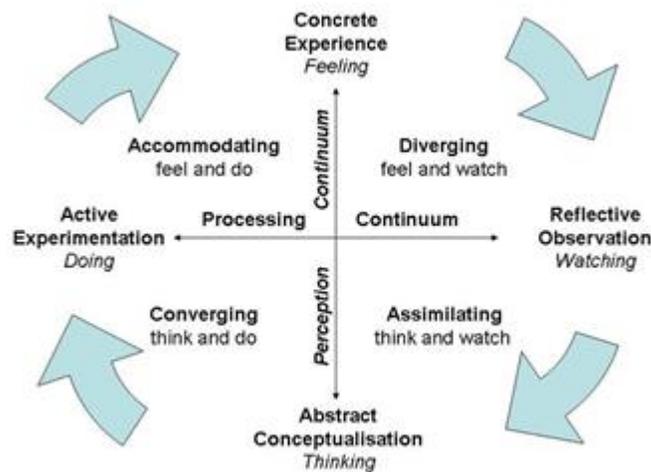
Figure 3: Kolb's Learning Theory and Learning styles (1974)

It is the role of Group Leader to facilitate the learning of the students in their group using this

Experiential Education model. The Experiment sets out learning goals that can be used by the

Group Leaders to frame reflection during program and particularly during each stage of the

program. The goals are:

- Explore a new country through hands-on experience

- Connect and engage meaningfully with another culture

- Deepen consciousness towards critical global issues shaping the host county as well as communities back home

- Cultivate empathy and harmony across ethnic, religious and national communities while on the program and back home.

- Deepen leadership, teamwork, cross cultural competence, language acquisition, and communication and problem-solving skills.

- Grow personally to become a confident and accountable leader. (World Learning, 2018)

Janeway summarizes these goals in *Beyond Experience, The Experiential Approach to Cross-Cultural Education* (1977)

> We do believe that people can learn how to develop appreciative, non-exploitive relationships with others if they aspire to do so; we can learn how to develop the attitudes necessary for the creation of a new world order which serves the whole with a deep, abiding respect and recognition of the parts; we can learn how to cooperate with people who represent a different set
> of values and perspectives on life, those people who are in fact different in many critical ways; we can learn how to continue learning to do these challenging things throughout our lives (p. 6).

Although this was reflected upon over 40 years ago, it is still relevant to Experiment programs today.

Group Leader Role

The Experiment Group Leader is tasked with supporting participants, guiding and mentoring them though a 3 to 6-week summer abroad experiences. Group Leaders are responsible for the physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual and social well-being of their students throughout the duration of the program. In short, Group Leaders are international educators. Watt (1967) describes the leader as the most important member of the group who sets the "emotional tone (of the group) as cheerful, interested and cooperative" and by following "well-recognized procedures he can add materially to the effectiveness of discussions." (p. 80).

While "in a discussion, a leader is necessary to guide the thinking in a straight line so that it will

not go round and round" (p. 90).

Experiment Group Leaders are selected for their skills as educators, for their background

in working with young people, and for their experience living and working internationally

(World Learning, 2018). Given their broad and extensive involvement in international education,

leaders are well equipped to not only be educators but also to take on various other roles as

outlined in the 2017 *Group Leader Handbook.*

> Coach: Those that inspire students with and move them towards a goal. Coaches
> are often most effective when they can develop interpersonal connections with
> youth and at the same time hold high expectations of each student.
>
> Facilitator: Those that provide opportunities for student learning and allow students
> to establish their own personal goals and take ownership over their learning. You
> facilitate dialogues, workshops, activities and mediations. You teach skills and
> reflection and share your knowledge.
>
> Manager: Those that actively direct the process and carry out the "vision" through
> delegation, activity initiation and follow-through. Managing a group means dealing
> with the logistics of mobilizing the group, making decisions to ensure the safety of
> the group, and ensuring that all participants are engaging appropriately. (p. 17)

In addition, Group Leaders are required to manage all other aspects of program implementation,

including finances, logistics, reporting, and risk management. Simon Norton (2014) summarizes

leadership as "a series… series of evolving decisions based on the best possible information

available in the moment combined with the lessons and wisdom of experience, sound analysis of

the factors in front of you, and the maximum use of all available resources" (YPLD Course

Binder, Spring 2014). Watt (1977) considers this further: "two essential building blocks in a

successful Experiment are a well-chosen group and a carefully selected, trained leader" (p. 107).

Given these criteria, The Experiment endeavors to hire the most qualified group leaders to

support their students on program using 4 outlined criteria 1) a bachelor's degree or equivalent

experience 2) leadership experience working with high school students 3) experience living and working abroad and 4) competence in the language and culture of the host country. (World Learning, 2018). The challenge to hire the most qualified leaders for a specific program is obvious. In addition, prioritizing the most important aspects of these leader qualifications itself presents a quandary. Qualifying educational experience over language and cultural competency surely has its benefits - the experiential education and the intended learning on program improves by leaps and bounds but the cultural and language learning piece in delivery may not be as strong. Prioritizing these qualifications differently would obviously lead to a different outcome. It is important to recognize that the group leaders or pairs of co-leaders are not solely responsible for the education and the learning of the group or the individual student. This learning also falls to the Experimenters, or participants. The *Group Leader Handbook* (2016) notes "Experimenters should understand that while group leaders can support and create opportunities for learning, the responsibility for learning belongs to the student" (p. 26). It is in this duality that Group Leaders often find both their opportunity and their biggest challenge.

A major challenge in the Group Leader role is to manage group dynamics as well as individual reactions to interactions, activities and events that a particular student or the group is engaged in. Larson and Waller (2010) explain this as a dynamic relationship that youth have with the program itself in terms of a history in that these interactions between leader and participant are built up over time and inform how students will respond to a particular challenge when confronted. In other words, participants reactions draw upon past experiences on program to navigate a challenging situation. How a practitioner/Group Leader chooses to respond to a "dilemma" is indicative of their ability to "read and appraise situations" and be cognizant not only of the effects of their response, but also how the situation could unfold. They explain "the

abilities to balance --to weigh and address diverse considerations (the developmental needs of participants) while keeping youth at the center--are vital practitioner skills for creating and sustaining program quality" (p. 347). In this, it is not only important to be proactive about setting program intentions, goals, and a code of conduct for the learning community, but also to discuss and anticipate points of challenge throughout the program and prepare for responses and navigational tools to overcome identified challenges. This speaks to a need for a foundation in youth development in order to respond accordingly in supporting not only the goals of the program, but also in the development of the participants. Fletcher (2006) writes of this development and empowerment in that it is reliant upon "the justice of responsible adults who are working for them (youth) in responsible ways; partnerships are the pinnacle of that hope" (p. 14-15). These partnerships of mutual respect and power equity will be considered throughout this capstone.

In the beginning Experiment groups only required one leader per group, and that has since changed two or possibly three leaders per group depending on program and student needs. The group of three leaders consists of two US Group Leaders and one In-Country co-leader. The addition of this third co-leader adds another level of complexity to the Group Leader role.

Another aspect of the Group Leader role is managing In-Country partner relationships. The Experiment's full-time program staff manages these relationships throughout the year, collecting program feedback from all aspects of the program - participants, group leaders and full-time staff. Provided with this feedback, In-Country partners submit edited and improved program itineraries for the following summer and work with staff on Experiment pedagogy, policy and risk management. As such, these relationships are constantly evolving. The Group Leader's role with the In-Country partner is to be an ambassador of The Experiment while also

recognizing the long-standing relationships that have existed and will continue to exist after their

summer program. The *Group Leader Handbook* (2017) states that the Group Leaders can expect

In-Country Offices to

- Orient group and/or leaders upon arrival
- Provide logistical support
- Coordinate emergencies and be available in the case of an emergency
- Recruit host families and coordinate homestays (p. 19).

A big challenge for the Group Leader is recognizing and adapting to the variable conditions and

capabilities of each host-country office. Some In-Country partners are more hands on and active

in program implementation through orientations or thematic component delivery while others are

not. For example, some In-Country partners do not play any role in group dynamics or student

support. Group Leaders would then need to advocate for their students regarding health and

overall well-being.

I intend to reflect on and analyze my work as an Experiment Group Leader in the roles of

coach, facilitator, manager, and educator. I will incorporate reflections on the varying

relationships I managed while serving as a Group Leader coordinating with my co-leader, the In-

Country partner and the Vermont office. These relationships impacted my approach with my

students not only related to logistics, but also to group dynamics. My analysis will also utilize

feedback and evaluations from my co-leaders and the In-Country partners with whom I worked

on programs. Feedback from full time staff will also be incorporated in this analysis.

My Role as a Group Leader for The Experiment

I have led three programs for The Experiment. My first program, in the summer of 2014,

was in Argentina focusing on Community Service & The Great Outdoors. Subsequently, I led a

program to Nicaragua & Cuba in Summer 2015 focusing on Arts & Social Change and to South

Africa in 2016 focusing on Human Rights. All three of these programs challenged me in my role

as a Group Leader in different and significant ways. Utilizing these three programs that I lead as

case studies, I will examine these challenges and how they impacted the evolution of my skills in

youth development. Each of these programs I led embody the progression of my work in

overcoming unique obstacles and developing myself as an educator and as a trainer. Ryland

White, a distinguished training professor at SIT, instilled in me the mantra that we are all "works

in progress". I hope to accurately assess where I am in this progress- where have I come from?

Where am I now? And where do I hope to go? as a youth development practitioner.

In order to properly assess myself a Group Leader and educator, I cannot only focus on

my approach in this role as this would be one-sided. The experience of my participants on

program is of vital importance as this informs a significant, if not greater, piece of my

effectiveness as an educator. In this context, my analysis will be a dual track of both examining

my work and approach as an educator through the experiences of my participants on program as

well as relating this feedback and these experiences to youth development, empowerment and

social justice education theories. With these two lines of inquiry and analysis interwoven, I hope

to provide and comprehensive and holistic image of myself as an educator--how this is informed

by and related to theory.

Reflection Grounded in Theory

As a youth development practitioner, one is working with young people in various

capacities, from a more formal classroom setting, to a more adventurous and experiential

environments (service learning, adventure and study abroad programs for example) and as such,

it is important to examine and integrate youth development, youth empowerment, and social

justice theory in one's practice with youth as these can not only affect, but also inform one's

approach as educator as well as one's reactive and proactive responses in this role. These reactive and proactive responses hold vast power and influence in lives of youth as the following theories suggest. Understanding where youth are in this development process is crucial to being an effective, relatable, and influential educator.

Many of these theories are antiquated but still remain true and relevant to working with youth today. Youth development, youth empowerment, and social justice education are deliberately chosen here as they are interrelated in that youth development serves as the foundation for this work and youth empowerment and social justice education are interwoven together to build upon youth development. It is here that one can truly impact and influence a youth's trajectory. Youth empowerment informs social justice education and vice versa. As such, my analysis of my work as Youth Development Practitioner will be grounded in theory in that I will connect my role as Group Leader to theory on both the individual (myself) and the student (Experimenters) level.

Although this inquiry is a practice in reflection on my role as a youth development practitioner, it is compulsory to not only incorporate, but also to examine youth development, educational and youth empowerment as well as social justice education as an aspect of this analysis. This examination will not only shape and guide my analysis, but also serve as a point of origin and a springboard to connect theory with practice.

Youth Development Theories

Examined through a range of developmental stage theories, adolescents and young adults fall into interim stages. Adolescents are continuously developing their emotional and intellectual identities and are shaped by every experience. Youth and adolescent empowerment programs

provide the valuable experiences and intentional spaces of learning that are absolutely

transformational for this development.

According to Freud in his Psychosexual Theory of Development (1905), adolescents fall

into the Genital stage which begins during puberty and is a time of sexual experimentation. I

would take this further to argue that experimentation in many other aspects of adolescent

behavior take place at this stage. Freud argues that this experimentation resolves itself by finding

a heterosexual partner.

Developmental Psychologist Erikson (1963, 1970) expanded on Freud's work

emphasizing the role of culture and society as opposed to just the ego and superego. He poses

that the stage of adolescence from the beginning of puberty until late teens is a time of searching

and that "the adolescent mind is essentially a mind or moratorium, a psychosocial stage between

childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be

developed by the adult" (Erikson, p. 245 as cited in McLeod, 2017). It should be noted that at

this stage, action is most important as adolescents are increasingly focused on defining their

identity than being stuck in role confusion which Erikson defines as "reexamining identity...both

sexual and occupational" (as cited in McLeod, 2017). Bee (1992) states that what should happen

at the end of this stage is "a reintegrated sense of self, of what one wants to do or be, and of

one's appropriate sex role" (as cited in McLeod, 2017). Finally, related to this stage is a sense of

independence and looking towards the future in terms of career, family building and a role in

society. Similarly, psychosocial theorist Super (1990) coined this stage *exploration,* a time in

which individuals become aware of their interests and abilities, develop skills, and explore

potential career options.

Similar to Freud and Erikson, Piaget (1936) formulated a stage model of psychosocial development based upon cognitive development and interaction with the environment but it differs in that it proposes "discrete stages of development, marked by qualitative differences rather than gradual increases in number and complexity of behavior concepts and ideas" (McLeod, 2015). His formal operational stage from 11 years of age and older is defined by the acquisition of the ability to think about abstract concepts and logically test hypotheses. Moreover, they are able to ponder abstract relationships and ideas such as justice.

These stage models of development focus on how adolescents internalize the meaning of an event they experience in their lives and how they negotiate such an event. But it is not only internal processes that affect cognitive, emotional, and social development. Evans (2003) summarizes, "the manner in which they accomplish these tasks is seen as contingent on both internal variables such as personality and attitude and external variables, such as available support networks and outside resources" (p. 187). These external variables that Piaget calls "social interactions with peers, parents, and other adults" are especially influential in cognitive development" (Piaget as cited in Evans 2003, p. 190).

An Experiment program provides and creates an intentional educational setting outside of the home. King and Baxter Magolda (2003) noted that "both person (learner characteristics) and environment (learning context) must be considered when designing educational experiences" (p. 232). Baxter Magolda's Learning Partnership Model or LPM (2004), although designed in through research with U.S. College students. It can also be examined in this context. This model operates on three key assumptions and three key principles:

The three assumptions of the research were:

- knowledge is complex and socially constructed;
- self is central to knowledge construction;

- authority and expertise is shared in the mutual construction of knowledge among peers

Three principles of the model are:
- validating learners' capacity to know;
- situating learning in learners' experience;
- mutually constructing meaning. (p. 41-43).

Baxter Magolda proposes that the three assumptions "challenge learners to journey toward self-authorship, while the three principles bridge the gap between their current developmental place and authoring their own beliefs, identities, and relationships" (p. 42). The principles of the model, put into practice, support students in their developmental process. When educators validate students "capacity to know" they affirm the individual student value. By situating students in an intentional learning environment or "learning in learners' experience" educators encourage a process of looking back to look forward as a foundation for individual learning and growth. And finally, in "mutually constructing meaning", educators break down existing power structures between teacher and learner which is crucial not only to development but also to empowerment of the youth. Kegan (1994) writes of this model as "an evolutional [sic] bridge that offers both welcoming acknowledgement to exactly who the person is right now as he or she is and fosters the person's psychological evolution" (p. 43). Given this pedagogical framework, it is crucial that Experimenters feel both challenged and supported by their experiences on program.

In expanding on the second principle in the above model, Chen and Farruggia (2002) cite "cultural values and societal systems may impact individual adolescents' development through the mediating effects of proximal social contexts such as family and peers" (p. 5). In the intentional learning environment created by The Experiment these proximal factors can serve a duality of function - to create new and challenging social situations, but also to rely on prior

experience to navigate these situations. John Dewey (1990) asserted "students needed to see their world in the context of the prevailing economic and political systems, their understanding would be stimulated and enriched by active involvement in both academic and empirical learning experiences (as cited in Kipp, 2004, p. 2). This implies that active learning and real-life exploration and reflection are central to this model, and in the case of The Experiment, encouraged and required for participants.

Youth Empowerment Theories

There has not been much scholarship and research done on youth empowerment as an entity unto itself. Often youth empowerment is coupled with educational theory or woven into program design. Empowerment, by definition, denotes authority or power given to someone to do something. Botkin, Jones and Kachwaha (2007) outline different forms of power in a social justice education context. These are: *Power over:* the use of domination to act or produce an effect, also called false power, *Power with:* the use of connection and cooperation to act or produce an effect and *Power within:* the use of inner wisdom to act or produce an effect. They also define empowerment as "increasing individual and collective power by exposing the fallacies of *power over* and increasing our abilities to *use power* with and *power withi*n" (p. 190). In all education spaces, these power dynamics exist based on engrained socializations. It is only in the breakdown of these power dynamics, that students and educators are able to utilize their power with and power within, leading to empowerment. Thus, empowerment is an active, participatory and collaborative process.

This participatory cycle is explored in Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, and McLoughlin (2006) as they summarize: "youth empowerment involves a participatory cycle that engages youth in safe environments and meaningful activities where they can learn skills, confront

challenges, demonstrate successes, and receive support and positive reinforcement for their

efforts, can lead to empowerment on an individual level" (p. 39). This "skill learning" can come

from reflection inherent in Kolb's Experiential Learning model and also Dewey's assertions that

education must insist upon engagement in both academic and empirical learning. Whitman

(1982) discusses youth empowerment in a different but related way by noting that young people

learn through "active participation in the relationships, events, and institutions that affect their

lives, develop and apply their capacity to transform themselves and the world in which they

live" (as cited in DiBenedetto and Ungerleider, 1997, p. 62).

The common themes in the various schools of thought are that through active

participation or action, youth are empowered to impact the world in which they live. In returning

to Jennings et al. 2006), their explorations of Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE) identify six

dimensions garnered from the varying models discussed above:

1. *A welcoming and safe environment* - where youth feel valued, respected,
    supported and encouraged.

2. *Meaningful participation and engagement* - youth are provided
    opportunities to engage in meaningful activities through which authentic
    contributions are essential

3. *Equitable power-sharing between youth and adults* - For CYE to occur,
    organizations need to examine attitudes, ideas and activities relating to
    power and power-sharing. In theory, youth-centered power is associated
    with youth empowerment programs. However, in practice it is often
    difficult to achieve and maintain an equitable balance of decision-making
    and power within youth programs.

4. *Engagement in Critical reflection on Interpersonal and Sociopolitical
    Processes* - If the goal of CYE is to transform people's lives and
    communities, inclusion of critical reflection in a youth empowerment
    effort is imperative.

5. *Participation in Sociopolitical Processes in Order to Effect Change* -
    Essential to CYE is the notion that youth participation within the

community includes engagement in sociopolicital processes and social change.

6.   *Integrated Individual and Community-Level Empowerment* - CYE integrates opportunities and results in positive change at both individual and community levels. (p. 41)

In this model, the final three are the most challenging as they require not only organizational change and shift in power dynamics but also understanding of existing structures and how to navigate them. It is only by critical reflection and understanding that the possibility of change emerges. This critical reflection aspect is central to Paulo Freire's thesis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which deduces that people who are not "critically aware of visible and invisible structures and processes that make up social institutions and practices, nor of their own role and actions within these institutions and practices, then there is little room for empowerment" (as cited in Jennings et al, p. 47). In this case, critical reflection is synonymous with capacity building through analysis, action, and reflection, which is a microcosm of Kolb's Experiential Learning Model of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and testing.

John Ungerleider and Simon Norton posit that successful empowerment programs include models of youth empowerment and psychological development; approaches to education and dialogue; activities both in facilitation and processing; program design; health, safety and risk management; and the role of the educator. This not only touches on the theoretical perspectives examined above, but also requires a more structured approach in terms of program design and implementation (YPLD Course Binder, Spring 2014).

The Experiment defines youth empowerment as "the process by which youth gain the skills, the confidence, and the agency to make decisions and create opportunities that impact their own lives and the lives of others in a positive way". Programs are designed and built in a way that "provides building blocks for student independence, increased confidence, decision

making and an overall sense of empowerment." The Experiment also encourages students to seek

out and explore opportunities for independence and group leadership (*Group Leader Handbook,*

2016 p, 24). Critical reflection, as I will explore, is embedded throughout Experiment programs,

in design and delivery. However, it is dependent on the group leader to create the spaces for

reflection and on the participants to actively participate on all aspects of the program.

Diversity, Inclusion, & Social Justice Education

Diversity and a commitment to inclusion and inclusive practices characterize another

aspect of youth empowerment and social justice education. Participants on Experiment's

programs come from all over the United States as well as from other countries around the world

and are representative of diverse racial, socio economic, educational and geographic

backgrounds. One staff member commented that The Experiment sends students abroad who are

representative of the fabric of the American people.

It is the role of the Group Leader to utilize these differences in experience, in background

and in beliefs, to promote the collective learning of the group. This is accomplished by

facilitating dialogue and reflection, creating space and opportunities for learning. It is through

this learning process or as Chen and Ferruggia (2002) deems it, "the mediating effects of

proximal social context" (p. 5) that adolescents' development and empowerment can occur. 80%

of the students on my Nicaragua/Cuba program strongly agreed that they valued the diversity of

their group and 40% strongly agreed that they selected the Experiment due to the diversity of the

program participants (and the availability of financial aid that necessarily goes hand-in-hand to

allow a diverse pool of participants) (*Student Survey Responses,* NUA, 2015). For my program to

Argentina, 55.56% strongly agreed that they valued the diversity of their group and 10% strongly

agreed that they selected the program due to the diversity of program participants (*Student*

Survey Responses, ARS, 2014). In these responses, the consciousness around diversity indicates an already established notion of diversity in a space of learning, so much so that it plays a major factor in program selection for many of the participants. This indicates a commitment on the part of the participants to intercultural learning, empathy and communication wherein both the host culture and the group experience are of equal value and emphasizes the role of Group Leader in furthering this collective ideology, facilitating a radical shift into social justice education, unlike similar programs.

This radical shift to social justice goes farther than the visible multiculturalism, diversity and environment of empathy on program indicated above to "action and interaction, critical inquiry and an approach with the primary goal of reaching, including, more deeply understanding, and advocating for historically marginalized and oppressed groups" (Gallor, 2017) Moreover, Gallor argues that educators need to be "inclusive of dominant and minority group voices and perspectives to deepen understanding and social action" (p. 254-255). This is a shift from more traditional social justice educators that advocate for the voice of the oppressed and not the oppressor. In this case, Gallor is arguing that both sides need to be heard in order to raise consciousness and a call for social action. Christine Sleeter, in her *Probing Beneath Meanings of Multicultural Education* (2010) indicates "the goal of multicultural education as anti-discrimination and social justice is to strengthen collective power of disempowered groups, and to cultivate allies among dominant groups" (p. 14) balancing between the disempowered and the dominant groups.

The role of the group leader in this process of social justice education is critical not only when analyzing one's role as an educator but also in examining and incorporating one's own positionality in response to social justice issues that emerge on program. Bell et al. (2007)

explain that we (as educators) need to be willing to examine and deal honestly with our values,

assumptions, and emotional reactions to oppression issues (p. 380). In doing this, we are able to

best support our students.

> The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical
> analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization
> within oppressive systems and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to
> interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the
> institutions and communities of which they are a part (p. 2).

In addition, Freire (1970) and Weiler (1991) argue that "a commitment to social justice requires

a moral and ethical attitude towards equality and the possibility and a belief in the capacity of

people as agents who can act to transform their world" (a cited in Adam et al, 2007, p. 13).

Both the process of youth empowerment and social justice education involve critical

reflection by the participants and by the facilitators and as such they are interwoven. This

analysis of my role as a group leader is a critical reflection on myself as a youth development

practitioner as well as an educator committed to the process of social justice and how this

impacts my students. I will examine my positionality and the systems of oppression and

liberation in my three groups, as well as how I navigated these issues to both support and

challenge my students to not only learn and reflect upon their experiences, but also to become

empowered in calls to action and to create change. As such, this incorporation of my approach as

an educator as well as my students' experience will be interwoven.

Reflective Analysis as a Group Leader

In beginning my analysis of myself as Group Leader, I began by reviewing and critically

reflecting on four sources of evaluation: (1) Experiment staff feedback, based on interactions

with Group Leaders during Leadership Training Week and while on the ground with students (2)

In-country partner feedback; (3) Participant feedback garnered through post-program surveys

and (4) Co-leader feedback as part of the post-program report including the post-program report which Group Leaders are required to submit. This feedback and evaluations submitted by all stakeholders invested in the program, from design to implementation to participation, will serve as the material for my analysis of myself as an educator and youth development practitioner during my time leading programs for The Experiment. While integrating many sources of feedback, it is important not only to contextualize it, but also recognize the many factors and points of view that come into play when considering program evaluation. Larson and Walker (2010) explain "examination of the dilemmas of practice provides a window for understanding the challenges to achieving program quality in the daily life of programs" (p. 339). In this sense, I hope to improve my approach as an educator which will then enhance students experience on program. For the purposes of this reflection, I seek to consider these feedback sources while also integrating this feedback into my analysis of relating theory to practice, not only in my performance as an educator, but also how this impacts the participant experience. This two-fold process will provide a holistic view of growth in my approach as a youth development practitioner.

In the last two years, The Experiment has created a system of feedback at the completion of each summer program. Group Leaders utilize this valuable input to evaluate both the strengths and areas for potential improvement for their programs and also to consider whether or not to lead a group on a future program. The feedback consists of student evaluations, In-Country partner feedback, and full-time staff experiences in working with leaders during Leader Training Week and throughout the duration of the program. John Hattie and Helen Timperley, in *The Power of Feedback* (2007) propose three major feedback questions: Where am I going? (what are the goals?) How am I going? (what progress is being made toward the goal?) And where to

next? (what activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?). They propose that the answers to these questions "enhance learning when there is a discrepancy between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood" (p. 22). Although this model was designed for student feedback in a classroom, it can be applied to Experiment programs, as well. Utilizing this model, I am seeking to answer the following questions: Where am I going as a youth development practitioner? How am I evolving in this role? And, where am I going? I have valued feedback in my work with The Experiment as it has served as a foundation on which to continuously improve and evolve as a youth development practitioner. I value feedback as tools for continually evaluating my work through which I hope to evolve as an educator.

Argentina

I lead my initial program with The Experiment in the Summer of 2014. The program, entitled *Argentina: Community Service & The Great Outdoors,* focused on community service in both urban and rural areas in Argentina, as well as on language learning. Our group consisted of 16 students from all over the United States - some with extensive travel experience, and some whom had never left their home state. The program had its challenges, particularly in the realm of discipline and group dynamics. I felt like I embraced these challenges and regarded them as sources of learning in my role of Group Leader and educator. However, at the conclusion of the program, Experiment staff identified that I needed "more support and training" (Experiment Program Staff Feedback, Summer 2014) and the In-Country feedback was similar: that I did not understand my role as a Group Leader and this made it difficult for the In-Country partners to trust me. In reflecting back, this feedback revealed the challenges that a first-time leader would encounter leading a group of students abroad for the first time. It is only through experience and reflection that one can improve as an educator in this type of work.

On this program, my co-leader and I were not only supporting our students through their experience, but also managing a challenging In-Country partner relationship that was characterized by miscommunication and an overall lack of communication. My co-leader and I documented in our program report that were never introduced to The In-Country partner. In spite of this less than ideal partnership, we were able to maintain a strong focus on the learning and empowerment of our students, in line with Experiment program goals.

A particular strength of mine as reflected in program feedback was my ability to embrace and embody the different roles of a Group Leader. The Experiment sends out a post program surveys to all participants at the end of the summer. Part of this survey includes evaluations of group leaders and includes questions on performance in regard to learning and support. One student commented "Brian was able to balance being our friend but also our leader very nicely and appropriately" (*Student Survey Responses*, ARS, 2014). This comment is alluding to Jennings et al.'s (2006) notion of equitable power-sharing between youth and adults and is a dynamic and effective approach with students that I employ. This equitable power dynamic allows me as an educator and my students/participants to co-create a learning environment. Paulo Freire (1998) writes that there is no teaching without learning and that teaching is not just about transferring knowledge but rather "to know how to teach is to create possibilities for the construction of knowledge" (p. 49). In this program in particular, I was learning and experiencing along with my students, in a country and a culture that I had never experienced before. I reflected on my approach on this program and "being myself and letting my personality shine through" and I found this to have "positive results as it breaks down the barrier between teacher and student necessary for emergent and collective learning" (*Returner Application*, December, 2014).

Another strength in my approach with students on this program lay in my facilitation and

dialogue skills, particularly around challenging and uncomfortable topics. The most memorable

was conversation around sexism and homophobia, triggered by a rafting event where all six male

participants decided to be on a raft by themselves and not disperse equally among the three rafts.

This prompted concern from the group around, exposing gender imbalances existent in the

group. This then led to a group conversation around group dynamics. We were engaging students

in critical reflection in order to ultimately create change, in this case, a change in group

dynamics. Maurianne Adams (2007) in her *Pedagogical Frameworks for Social Justice*

Education explains that what develops in effective social justice education is a person's

"increasingly informed, differentiated, and inclusive understanding of within-group and

between-group commonalities and differences, and a personalized awareness of how these

understandings bear on one's everyday behaviors" (p. 18). The hope for in this critical dialogue

was to sow the seed for this development in our students. In another vein, the role of this

dialogue session was consciousness-raising. It encouraged connections between "awareness and

action" by helping participants "recognize various spheres of influence in their daily lives;

analyze the relative risk factors in challenging discrimination or oppression in intimate relations,

friendship networks and institutional settings; and identify personal or small group actions for

change" (p. 30). Although Experiment programs all have a foundation in social justice, it is also

acknowledged this is a challenge, given the time frame and scope. As group leaders, we hope

that these conversations and the way in which we approach them will pave the way for action

outside beyond the program -in sharing experiences with family and friends and integrating these

lessons in their lives moving forward. One student on the post-program survey replied to the

question of how the Experiment experience has changed them: "It changed the way I thought I

knew the world because what I initially thought and what I know now is totally different"

(*Student Survey Responses,* ARS, 2014).

In the months that followed my first program with the Experiment, I was not only

reflective on my performance as a Group Leader, particularly in regard to discipline and group

dynamics, but also how I could utilize my strengths to create more opportunities for

transformational learning in the future. I had a strong sense that the disciplinary issues on that

program overshadowed the potential learning and growth. Perhaps I leaned too heavily on an

approach which created an equitable power dynamic that allowed the students more freedom

than they were prepared to take on. The "Manager" role" would have been more appropriate for

this group of students. In response to the application prompt of how I hoped to evolve as a Group

Leader (when applying for a subsequent Group Leader position), I commented that "self-

confidence emerged as a theme for me" and that "I could have been more confident in my

approach with students" (*Returner Application*, December 2014). Self-confidence in oneself as

an educator, as an authority figure when appropriate and in one's ability to navigate group

dynamics, while also ensuring the health and safety of the students is the crux of the challenge of

the group leader role - in creating opportunities and space for emergent learning and

empowerment but doing so in a safe and supportive manner.

Nicaragua/Cuba

The second program I led for The Experiment was *Nicaragua/Cuba: Arts & Social

Change*. I approached this program with a year of group leading experience under my belt, but

that is not to say that this program was any easier. Each program has its unique sets of challenges

- mostly due to the makeup of the student group as well as the relationship between the leaders

and the In-Country partners. Similar to my experience in Argentina, I had never traveled to

Nicaragua or Cuba prior to the program, so I was not always able to deliver relevant cultural information to the students and contextualize many of the experiences the group was having. Although this is typically the responsibility of the In-Country partner, it was not always clear whose role it was to provide this cultural context. In light of this I directed my energy into cultivating group dynamics and leading dialogue and reflection. The In-Country partner commented on my lack of cultural awareness but also acknowledged that I "seemed to lead the group discussions and was also on top of the program and managed the group well" (*Leader Evaluations from Partners*, NUA, 2015). My Co-Leader had vastly more knowledge of the country and of the culture, so I took the lead on group dynamics and dialogue while my co-leader focused more on intercultural communication.

Our group reflection time and the intentionality of it was particularly valuable on this program as it created the space not only for connection-building and group dynamics, but also for more thematic content to be discussed. Many students commented on the group experience in their responses to the post-program survey "our reflections and debriefs were always full of wisdom and respect" and that they allowed "for personal connections and a deep understanding of eachother [sic]" (*Student Survey Responses,* NUA, 2015). In relating these sentiments to empowerment and more specifically to Jennings et al (2006), my co-leader and I were not only creating the space for "meaningful participation and engagement" but also pouring the foundation for the ultimate goal of *participation in sociopolitical processes in order to affect change*.

The theme of *Arts and Social Change* implies an underlying roadmap towards effecting change in one's community by not only learning of the inherent power of art to create change and fortify societal change but also relating it to individual and collective experiences back

home. In this thematic approach lies the connection between youth empowerment and empowerment through experiential education, which implies that the former informs the latter and vice-versa. It is the Group Leader's role to utilize these built-in points of engagement. As a Group Leader, I also engaged with the theme to structure reflections and dialogue. My co-leader and I intentionally designed discussions on how the students were already using art or planned to use art to effect change in their communities back home. We were building connections to their lives back home through experience and reflection on these experiences and "engaging more deeply, building mutual understanding and compassion" (Ungerleider, 2016, p. 9).

My participants were already immersed in the theme of the program and many had expressed their reasons for wanting to participate. They were eager to learn how to utilize their art (dance, theater and singing mostly) to create change in their schools and communities back home. Mary Breunig (2005) explains that when the role of the student is considered, not only does the educator carry the responsibility to create the conditions that provide opportunities for the students to work for social change, but also for students to "have a voice in the educational process, to have the knowledge and courage to be critical and to be interested in and committed to the process" (p. 118). The participants on the Nicaragua and Cuba program were committed to the theme of the program. 80% reported that what appealed to them most about the program was the specific theme *(Student Survey Responses*, NUA, 2015). It was in the creation of this environment, utilizing student interest and engagement to explore issues of arts in the context of an oppressive society in a safe and supportive way, and reflections on these learnings that meaningful social action was made possible.

South Africa - The Fellowship Initiative

The third program that I led with The Experiment was a custom program (designed for a specific client) in partnership with The Fellowship Initiative (TFI), which is part of JPMorgan Chase & Co's Corporate Responsibility arm. TFI provides intensive academic and leadership training to assist young men of color from economically distressed communities complete their high school educations and better prepare them to excel in colleges and universities (JPMorgan Chase & Co, 2018). The Experiment was tasked with designing and implementing a 2.5-week program to South Africa for 120 young men of color focused on leadership development and global exposure. South Africa was chosen as a destination, specifically for the parallels between the apartheid movement in South Africa and the civil rights movement here in the United States. Linda Rodriguez, Head of TFI explained (2016) "The Fellows are all too familiar with the challenges facing young people in their communities and they were moved by the struggles faced by South Africans" (JPMorgan Chase & Co). Leading a custom program has some unique challenges. First and foremost, it is not designed as a classic program in that the 4 key components of the program (Orientation, Homestay, Thematic Focus and Reflection) are not always included, or if they are, they tend to be truncated. Group Leaders are responsible for not only managing relationships with local partners, but also with additional staff. Given this, the potential for youth empowerment and utilization of the experiential learning model on program is diminished.

As a Group Leader, I was challenged by many aspects of this program particularly those surrounding learning goals and desired outcomes. I had certain expectations of learning and the potential for learning on this program base on my previous experience as a Group Leader on traditional 4-week Experiment programs. This program was different in that it was customized and notably shorter in length. These expectations were discussed at length with my colleagues

(both fellow Group Leaders and full-time Experiment staff) during Leader Training Week who were also leading this particular program. As a result of these conversations, I realized the need to let go of some of these expectations to best serve and support my students for the outcomes of a transformational program, regardless of the varying structure. I was concerned that the design of this particular program would fall short in terms of providing "building blocks for student independence, increase confidence and self-efficacy, decision making and overall sense of empowerment" *(Group Leader Handbook*, 2017, p. 127). As an educator and youth development practitioner, my goal is to always work towards the most successful program in terms of educational outcomes. To do this successfully, I need to work within the framework of the program design. I would be doing my participants a disservice if this was not the case.

This program did not include a homestay, which is the most educationally transformational piece of an Experiment program. It also did not allow for much independence, as the group was tightly scheduled for the remainder of the time. I also observed that the participants did not have much time to personally reflect on how the program was affecting them. I had wanted to have more dialogue and reflection sessions that I believe would have been beneficial, but received pushback, particularly from the JPMorgan staff.

I was concerned about my ability to relate to my students, young men of color, on many fronts, particular those surrounding inherent power and privilege. In my training courses at SIT, I explored the various ways in which identity, privilege and positionality play into social justice education work and how to incorporate this learning into practitioner work in the field. In academia, Social Identity and Development theories "describe differences in the ways that learners may incorporate, resist or redefine specific manifestations of social oppression (racism and sexism, for example) in the context of his or her own (racial or gendered) identity

development" (Adams, 2007, p. 17). As a facilitator in this context, I need to be cognizant of

these specific systems of oppression and also "de-center myself from my position of privilege"

(Johnson, 2006 p. 142) and break down the power dynamics that exist in such a system. I also

need to continue the process of developing "awareness about my feelings in difficult or

challenging discussions" as well as "gauging my ability to listen to multiple perspectives and

emotions" (Griffin & Ouellett, 2007, p. 91). My challenges around this are summarized by Bell,

Love, Washington and Weinstein (2007) in *Knowing Ourselves as Social Justice Educators*.

They write:

> We are not immune as faculty (or educators in this case) to feelings of guilt,
> shame, or embarrassment that arise in discussions of social injustice. Often, we
> are likely to be self-conscious about our own positions in the privileged or
> targeted group and concerned about how participants are likely to perceive us (p.
> 382).

In confronting these feelings of hesitation, I turned to dialogue and reflection, particularly when

discussing challenging topics such as systematic racial oppression faced by both the program

participants and the South Africans. As a group, we visited Robben Island, and spent a night in

the cells, the same cells where Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki, among many

others in the struggle against the apartheid regime, were imprisoned for many years. Although I

could not put myself in the heads, minds and emotions of my participants in that particular

moment, I sought to support them in their experience to the best of my ability. This support was

through dialogue. John Ungerleider (2016) explains "dialogue sessions create a structured

opportunity and a safe context to share openly and honestly, the thoughts and feelings about

issues of common concern" (p. 7). By giving students an opportunity to share their thoughts

through active participation, we are empowering them to speak their mind, find their voice and

be heard. This not only encourages the sharing of ideas, thoughts, emotions and personal stories, but also establishes equal footing between facilitator and participant.

Arnold et al. in *Educating for a Change* (2005) speak of not only the dynamic between participants engaged in this collective learning but also between educator/facilitator and participants noting the "ability to listen and learn from participants builds mutual respect, it affirms the dignity of all: it is the basis of empowerment, to listen is to be on equal footing; listening means putting yourself in the place of the other" (p. 162). In returning to Baxter Magolda's (2004) LPM, by using dialogue as a tool in this situation, I was "validating a learner's capacity to know" by allowing them to share their reflections on the particular experience based on their individual life experience. My facilitation style allowed "learning in learners' experience" and also "mutually constructed learning" through collective reflection.

As a facilitator for these dialogue sessions, I contributed by sharing my experience as a way to join with participants and "model openness to exploring my own relative positions of power and privilege in relation to different oppression issues" as suggested by Bell et al. (2007 p. 382). In this particular context, my knowledge of South African history and my sharing of my previous experiences living and working in South Africa, helped to establish the dynamics not only between facilitator and participant, and also between advantaged and targeted identities within the group or more specifically myself as a white male and my participants as young men of color.

Many of the participants in my group indicated that this type of dialogue and critical reflection was lacking in their daily lives back home, which seems to be common among many young people, as reported by Ungerleider (2012, p. 1). Just by the act of creating a space and providing a voice allows for significant growth and opportunities for empowerment. Numerous

participants in my group commented that their voices and opinions were never acknowledged, heard, or valued before entering the TFI program and traveling to South Africa. In this case, dialogue and critical reflection has at very least set the groundwork for empowerment and at most "the ability to see things from another perspective opens up creative alternatives" (Schell-Faucon, 2001, p. 6). A participant commented "these experiences help young people expand the boundaries of both comfort and imagination" (Rodriguez, JP Morgan Chase & Co, September 29th, 2016).

Another facet of dialogue relevant here is that the mere act of sharing experience contributes to the collective learning of the group. These "resources" as noted by bell hooks (1994) are the nuts and bolts of the learning process and serve as the catalyst for empowerment. When participants share their life experiences in a group dialogue or reflection, it not only increases awareness for the group participants, but it also confirms their experiences as valid sources of knowledge. Through this, empowerment does not only originate from educator/facilitator to participants/students but also from within the participants themselves. It is a continual revolving door of collective learning and individual experience that has no demarcated beginning or end.

In my self-evaluation at the conclusion of this program, I reflected that I had some initial hesitation in working with the TFI Fellows. I anticipated challenges in "connecting to their world" (*Performance Evaluation*, 2016), but I found just the opposite. By sharing my knowledge of South Africa and approaching the students on an equal footing by sharing my own life experiences, my participants were empowered through open and authentic collective sharing through these intentional dialogue sessions. It was the most challenging program for me in my career as a youth development practitioner and will remain with me as I move forward.

Synthesis: My Approach as a Youth Development Practitioner

In serving as an Experiment Group Leader for on three programs with different participants, I have grown tremendously in my approach to youth development, youth empowerment and social justice education. I have been challenged in the process of empowering my participants to develop and learn through experience and reflection on program and grow to be socially conscious changemakers. In this analysis of my challenges and strengths, I have evolved as an educator. This process of "self-actualization"(bell hooks, 1994) has not only solidified my approach as youth development practitioner and educator, but also brought into focus areas to be improved upon. Moreover, it has revealed the challenges of the Group Leader role - from managing relationships on program (with my co-leader, with my students, with In-Country Partners) to working with diverse and unique groups of students. This process has been two-fold for me. I have examined myself as an educator, in my approach and effectiveness, and I have also come to realize how this approach has impacted my students. These two facets are not mutually exclusive in that one cannot examine the approach without the effect or vice versa. As a Group Leader in this role, I cannot hold myself completely accountable for the experience of my students on program, but I can work within this framework to create the most meaningful experience possible for them.

Power Dynamics

A strength that emerged for me as a Group Leader was my ability to relate to my students and break down the power dynamics between teacher and student, or Group Leader and participant in this case. In creating a democratic space for teaching and learning, drawing on Freirean ideals, I have not only created spaces for my participants to share their ideas, reactions, and reflections based on life-experiences, but I have also gained valuable learning from my

students. The most impactful experience was my work with the TFI Fellows in South Africa -

providing them a voice and a participatory space of learning and growth. This created equity in

terms of power dynamics moving from an assumed *power over* structure to *power within.* This

duality of teaching and learning is now integrated into my approach as a youth development

practitioner. The participants on both my Argentina and Nicaragua/Cuba program on my

commented in post-program surveys on my ability to seamlessly navigate my different roles as a

group leader - from coach to facilitator to manager. (*Student Survey Responses*, ARS, 2015,

NUA, 2015).

There are also challenges within these power structures as my experience in Argentina

illustrates. Due to blurred lines of authority, my participants found themselves taking liberties

and breaking program rules. As a result, my co-leader and I had to utilize our *power over* to

respond accordingly as these infractions in behavior presented safety concerns for the whole

group. It was the first and only time that I have had to navigate serious disciplinary action with a

group of students on program. This type of abrupt action interrupts group dynamics and as a

result, it is difficult to reestablish a collective learning environment based on trust. This

illuminates the precarious nature of relationship-building with students, as sometimes

empowerment manifests as taking risks to the detriment of the group and the learning process.

Nevertheless, I believe the group learned valuable lessons as a result of navigating this trying

time together, utilizing it as a point of learning and growth.

Critical Reflection and Dialogue

My approach and aptitude in reflection and dialogue were effective for my students in not

only creating spaces and time to commune and share reactions to particular challenges on

program but also in providing context around empowerment. As Jennings et. al (2006) argues, there can be no empowerment without this insistence upon critical reflection. My students in Nicaragua/Cuba wrote of their experience, particularly with the thematic component of Arts and Social change, that in the act of creating art, they found empowerment, and this was through reflection and discussion, not only in the group, but also with the local community members.

During my experience in South Africa, I utilized dialogue as to tool to break down power dynamics to "de-center myself" from a position of privilege and creating an equity of power between myself and my student. I had numerous concerns about my effectiveness as a Group Leader in this particular program mostly due to my own positionality in working with young men of color. Due to my social identity as a white man of privilege, I was unsure as to how I would relate to them linking back to Bell et al.'s (2007) comments on awareness and positionality as an educator and advocating a heightened consciousness of how this can affect the learning environment.

What I found was that through dialogue, I was able to put myself on a somewhat equal footing with my participants. I believe my particular knowledge of South African history was a key factor enhancing my ability to relate to my participants. Furthermore, I was also particularly moved by emotional sentiments relayed by The Fellows at the conclusion of the program confirming that we had provided them a voice and a space to be heard and to be validated by their contributions to the group discussion, an experience that most of them never had before.

Commitment to Collective Learning

In reflecting on my first program as a Group Leader in Argentina with regards to my strengths, I wrote

> These skills include not only positivity and passion, and the ability to put my whole being into my work, but also strong facilitation skills, the ability to manage group dynamics and conflict. Moreover, I found my experience in asking

strategic questions to spark the process of emergent learning to be effective and
beneficial. My strengths lie in the realm of creating a safe and functional group
dynamic, developing a rapport with my students, my co-leader, the office in
Vermont and the In-Country partners. In addition, I laid a foundation for self-
exploration not only in terms of cultural identity (while in a different culture) but
also in challenging oneself to push their limits, and in doing so, learn and grow
from not only from their individual experiences but also from the collective
experiences of the group. (Sheffer, December 2014).

In reviewing these reflections, it would seem that my approach of diving headfirst into the role of

Group Leader and bringing my whole self to my work as an educator has been validated. As I

have explored and analyzed retrospectively my challenges in creating space for emergent and

collective learning, I have become more grounded and confident in my approach. In addition to

this, my explorations of related theory have honed my skills and techniques in youth

development, youth empowerment and social justice education. These three educational

approaches are intertwined. The goal of social justice education is to provide tools to understand

oppression and an individual's own identity within these systems and to empower individuals to

make changes in themselves and the institutions and communities they belong to. Comparatively,

youth empowerment necessitates a unique set of conditions/situations/structure for young adults

to achieve confidence and capacity to understand the world around them, and work for social

change when necessary. The relationship between youth development, youth empowerment and

social justice education builds from critical reflection on experience (Experiential Learning

Model) culminating in empowerment through active and collective participation.

Conclusion

As a youth development practitioner and educator, I identified the need to relate theory to

practice in this work during my time at SIT during training courses such as TDEL, TOT and

TSA. YPLD was a synthesis of both theory and practice, as students not only examined

educational theory but also practiced techniques and approaches. This allowed me to begin this

journey and continue it into my time working with The Experiment as a Group Leader. In this

analysis, I wanted to go on a journey, a critical reflection of myself as a practitioner in the field

while also incorporating student experience in reaction to my approach to this work. I sought to

uncover my strengths but also pinpoint opportunities for improvement. I found the answers and

validation from qualifiable sources in performance feedback offered in student survey responses,

in staff and partner feedback, in program reports, and in my personal reflections. This feedback

and reflection has coalesced into the building blocks of my journey and has provided for me a

personal link between theory and practice.

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