



**Chapter Title:** Introduction

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**Date:** 2023

**Page numbers:** 1-10

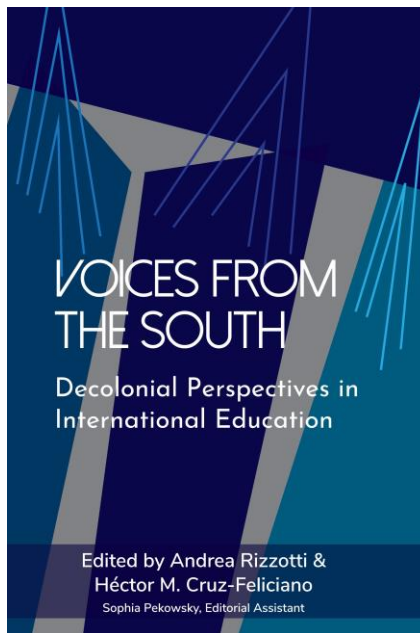
**DOI:** 10.36.366/SIA.3.978-1-952376-32-0.1

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**How to cite this chapter:**

Rizzotti, A. & Cruz-Feliciano, H. M. (2023). "Introduction." In A. Rizzotti & H.M. Cruz-Feliciano (Eds.), *Voices from the South: Decolonial Perspectives in International Education* (pp. 1-10). The Forum on Education Abroad. 10.36.366/SIA.3.978-1-952376-32-0.

**This chapter appears in:**



For more information about this volume, visit: <https://www.forumea.org/voices-from-the-south.html>

# 1

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## Introduction

**Andrea Rizzotti and Héctor M. Cruz-Feliciano**  
(translated by Sophia Pekowsky)

The nobodies: nobody's children, owners of nothing. The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodied, running like rabbits, dying through life, screwed every which way.  
Who don't speak languages, but dialects.  
Who don't have religions, but superstitions.  
Who don't create art, but handicrafts.  
Who don't have culture, but folklore.  
Who are not human beings, but human resources.  
Who do not have names, but numbers.  
Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the police blotter of the local paper.  
*The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them*

—Eduardo Galeano

We open with a quote from the poem “The Nobodies” by the Latin American author Eduardo Galeano to show a reality of our contemporary world, in which inequality manifests not only in economic disparity but also in the hierarchization of culture. The hypocritical binaries between art and folklore, language and dialect, and religion and superstition that Galeano highlights show the value that Western culture is given over all other forms of knowing and being (epistemologies and ontologies). These binaries are enforced to the point where differences are seen as marks of inferiority and are used to legitimize inequalities.

The hierarchization of culture seeps into every aspect of international relations, and international education (IE) is no different. The disparities, inequalities, and hierarchies that exist within and between diverse countries

are recreated in academic institutions, resulting in educational systems, linguistic models, and pedagogies that create unequal distribution of resources, decision making, and circulation of knowledge between members of the field.

The idea for this book was born from the editors' experiences working with U.S. students in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Rizzotti and Pekowksy), and various regions of Latin America (Héctor M. Cruz-Feliciano), with U.S.-based providers. While IE and exchange have a rich, complex, and global history dating back to ancient times, study abroad in the United States began as a way for privileged students, generally White men from wealthy families, to study in Western Europe. With the onset of the 20th century, leading into the post-World War II context, study abroad and international exchange began to be used by the U.S. government as a way to encourage peace and diplomacy and spread U.S. influence across the globe. Programs such as Fulbright and Peace Corps, founded in 1948 and 1961 respectively, encouraged young U.S. students to travel across the globe, not just to study, but to conduct research and volunteer.

While the participating U.S. students and host countries have widely diversified in the last 50 years, the field still continues to reflect its roots, with 57.9% of students studying in Europe in 2019–2020 (NAFSA). Study abroad programs in the Global South are often advertised by providers as “nontraditional,” inviting students who perceive themselves to be particularly adventurous risk-takers. While programs in Europe are seen as valuable opportunities for *academic* exchange, programs in the Global South are advertised as “adventures,” opportunities for learning “outside of the classroom.”

As Elena Corbett discusses in this volume, students participate in study abroad programs in the Middle East to learn about “international relations” or “diplomacy,” rather than appreciating the rich and situated traditions of literature, math, science, art, and philosophy within the region. Because of this devaluation of local academic systems, undergraduate or premedical students coming from the United States sometimes assume that they can practice medicine or undertake projects in the Global South that they would never be permitted—due to licensure and qualification requirements—to conduct in their home contexts.

Numerous publications have addressed the many ways that IE programs that host students from the Global North in communities in the Global South can replicate colonial and imperialist tendencies (Sharpe, 2015; Zemach-Bersin, 2007; Ogden, 2007; Bolin, 2001). There is also a wide array of articles that explore how study abroad promotional material reinforces colonial views of the “exotic other” (Vodopivec, 2012; Zemach-Bersin, 2009) or stereotypical “regional images” related to social identities and cultural components

(Felitti & Rizzotti, 2013–2016; Onyenekwu et al., 2017). In response to these observations and critiques, groundbreaking studies have explored and suggested concrete ways to decolonize IE (Ogden, 2020, Adkins & Messerly, 2019; Fichman, 2018).

While these scholars have created important and necessary guidelines for analyzing and reducing colonialist tendencies in study abroad, most of the literature on the matter has its origins in scholars and institutions based in the Global North. This book attempts to reverse this trend by giving center stage to study abroad professionals based in the Global South, whose lived experiences allow us to have a nuanced and current perspective on the challenges that colonial attitudes and practices pose for the future of IE.

We write this text to put into question the idea that decolonial analysis can be conducted without taking into account the institutional and social context in which we find ourselves. While we understand that a decolonial vision involves a subjective position on values as a starting point, these values cannot be separated from context. Rather than arguing that change can start from the micro, from an individual person and their immediate environment, we believe a decolonial analysis must imply an exchange between the subject and the context.

## Some Definitions

To begin with, we start with a short explanation of the definitions we are using and why we chose them. We work with the definition of the Global South from the Alternative Counter-Hegemonic Work Group From the Global South (CLACSO, 2019):

“In this Global South we include the nations of Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa that form a part of the capitalist periphery, but also the people and social classes within the Global North, are subjected to conditions of growing economic, political, and social degradation.”

While we focus on the first section of the definition—countries that form a part of the capitalist periphery—we acknowledge the complex power dynamics within the United States and other countries in the Global North. Within this book, we pay specific attention to the disruption caused by people with various marginalized identities in the United States upon exchanging experiences in the Global South.

In other historical moments, beginning with the Second World War, decolonization was conceptualized as a concrete action or series of actions intended to overthrow colonial regimes. Today, diverse authors such as

Catherine Walsh, Boaventura de Souza Santos, and Nestor Garcia Canclini, among others, discuss interculturality and decolonization as processes that involve a necessary dialogue between the individual and the collective to create social transformations. Through this process, institutions and organizations can begin to change the systems of inequalities and injustice that they sustain. In decolonial theories, the deconstruction of the colonial “other” is fundamental to establishing any basis for dialogue and interaction.

This publication is a proposal to rethink the practices of IE programs from a decolonial perspective, both in theory and in practice. It is a proposal to revise the practices that we implement and the dialogues between partners, with the help of The Forum on Education Abroad’s *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad*.

## The Chapters

We bring together a group of professionals and experts with a long trajectory of development and management of programs situated in diverse countries across the Global South: specifically, Argentina, Chile, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Peru, Senegal, India, and Jordan. The large proportion of authors from Latin America is due to the authors’ personal and professional networks within this region; in future publications, we would like to include more perspectives from other regions. Some of us are originally from these regions, and others have developed personally and professionally for a long period within them.

We are voices from the Global South who intend to deconstruct IE models that have shown profound deficiencies in terms of inclusion, diversity, and equity, and intercultural dialogue and to simultaneously construct an IE that includes alternative visions. We present in this publication a series of articles that reflect on good practices and propose pedagogical models rooted in decolonial pedagogies.

In the development of this project, we hoped that each author could write in their own language, which would be placed beside an English translation. We saw this as a way to use English as a common language rather than a hegemonic language. Unfortunately, the cost and time required for editorial production brought down what we referred to as our “Tower of Babel of the Global South.”

Despite it not being logistically possible, we discuss this idea to highlight the linguistic diversity within the field of IE and the reality that many of the authors in this publication do not speak English as a first language. The very words you are reading were originally written in Spanish and translated into English, with much of the nuance and sentiment of the text lost in translation

despite our best attempts. We do not give up on our “Tower of Babel,” but rather acknowledge that more time is needed to make use of multilingualism in IE as a permanent practice, as a way to enrich ourselves and support inclusion and intercultural dialogue.

In this volume, we support a perspective based on critical and decolonial interculturality that seeks to create new forms of thinking that deconstruct the use of the White, western male as the center of analysis. We seek to decenter the value of reason over feeling-existing as a condition of humanity and to criticize Western philosophy that places the human above nature (Walsh, 2009). This publication is an invitation to deconstruct hierarchies between those involved in the development and management of academic and cultural mobilities.

It attempts to center non-hegemonic voices, especially in the relationship between the Global North and South. Thus, the primary goal is to decolonize our own thought processes and, consequently, the pedagogical and educational practices that we enact. This must happen not only in our activism and personal life, but also within our organizations in relation to the unequal relationships that exist within them.

Although we hold discourses and practices that value diversity as something positive and desirable, this idea of diversity is often surface-level and continues to promote structural inequalities and inequities. The authors in this volume propose alternative practices that allow us to rethink these issues related to racism, social and cultural inequities, and the imposition of models from the West in different contexts.

In this sense, the chapters by Marion Tizón; Hannah Sorila and Cheikh Thiam; and Diego Andrés Lugo-Vivas, Cyntoya McCall, and Pedro León Cortés-Ruiz show the limitations of the implementation of packaged format programs within local realities. Likewise, they propose alternative practices that allow us to rethink these issues related to racism, social and cultural inequities, as well as the imposition of White supremacist models from the West.

Marion Tizón, who worked in Peru for 15 years, analyzes systematic violence in IE and how to work to combat these dynamics in three stages: predeparture, on-site, and re-entry. She works directly with the *Standards of Good Practice* and weaves in examples from her experience to discuss concrete ways that these standards can be applied and expanded to combat the colonial legacy of study abroad. She discusses sexist violence, not only within Latin America but also in the United States, and how these dynamics are re-enacted in study abroad.

In order to recognize and embrace the different identities and diversities that may be part of IE experiences, it is essential that we reflect on the place

that “diversity” occupies both in social and educational contexts and during mobility experiences. We must consider that identity is not a fixed category, and markers such as race, gender, and class are defined in multiple and varied ways in different societies; therefore, this category must also be viewed through the lens of critical interculturality, intersectionality, and decolonial perspectives.

The chapter by Hannah Sorila and Cheikh Thiam is crucial in understanding the various meanings of diversity and why simply adding more diverse voices to the field won’t change the problems we are discussing. These authors undertake an important discussion analyzing how conversations regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in global education must take into account the persuasive nature of coloniality and White supremacy in higher education. They demonstrate how diversifying study abroad is not possible without analyzing the oppressive structures that cause institutions of higher education to be spaces that center White, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, and upper-class subjects. The chapter provides a theoretical explanation of the centrality of the White, male subject in Western thinking and ends with suggestions of action steps that universities and study abroad providers can undertake to incorporate a decolonial lens in their work.

Adding to this debate, Diego Andrés Lugo-Vivas, Cyntoya McCall, and Pedro León Cortés-Ruiz discuss how identity categories thought of as static can shift in different cultural contexts. They discuss their experiences working in an education abroad program in Colombia, which has enrolled primarily students of African descent in a field with predominantly White students.

The chapter uncovers ways in which students’ complex identities have impacted their study abroad experiences and how these experiences have in turn deepened their understanding of the self, as well as the challenges the program has faced in the process of connecting different ethnic and social groups and implementing a social justice framework in their practices.

The characteristics and learning expectations of the new generation of students urge us to rethink pedagogical strategies in all spheres of education. This new generation of young people, concerned about a sustainable life (in a wide and varied sense) and willing to question standard models, seems to be a global trend. For this reason, it is imperative to consider the curricular reorganization of the programs that we offer.

Héctor M. Cruz-Feliciano, with extensive experience in the development of programs in various Latin American countries, and Anitha Ramanna, head of programs and instructional design for an organization operating IE programs in India and Southeast Asia, both discuss proposals for the implementation of community programs from a decolonial perspective.

Anitha Ramanna presents a systemized report working in Pune, India, using the transformative learning theory, as proposed by Mezirow (1991), to analyze how “disorienting dilemmas”—experiences that do not fit into a person’s current views about the world—can lead to transformation and growth. She describes case studies in which humanitarian engineering students think with local communities, using solutions that make sense within the context of their environments rather than unsustainable solutions.

Héctor M. Cruz-Feliciano conducts a decolonial critique of service-learning projects in IE and advances “solidarity-based learning” as an alternative term. Using Paulo Freire’s ideas of liberatory education, he advocates for process-based projects that students can undertake with host communities as opposed to product-based projects that focus on completing tasks in short time periods.

In the past decades, neoliberal models have also become anchored within the structure of IE, both deepening and complicating colonial legacies. A historical review that focuses on the different perspectives that arise in a neoliberal context is essential to understanding how to apply decolonial perspectives to the field. Both Mauricio Paredes, the director of the Syracuse University Center in Santiago, Chile, and Elena Corbett, the director of programs in MENA, contribute to these debates.

Mauricio Paredes reflects on guilt and responsibility among U.S. students in Chile. Paredes uses Jasper’s fundamental text on guilt to explore the importance of recognizing and making visible criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical responsibilities, especially in the context of IE and in a historical moment marked by worldwide protests for social justice, independence, and gender and racial equity. He argues that with sufficient nuance, students who develop a sense of responsibility for the actions of their own country can forge concrete cultural connections that help them understand the present as well as the numerous political and moral responsibilities that help explain Latin America’s recent past.

Elena Corbett, formerly based in Jordan, introduces us to her experience with mutant neoliberalism in education abroad programs in the MENA region. She reframes the colonial student as a neoliberal student and analyzes the various dynamics of study abroad that make decolonization impossible. She discusses the post-COVID context and looks forward to the future of IE and the impact that the pandemic had, particularly on programs in the Global South.

Under these neoliberal models, IE has transformed into a business paradigm, standardizing practices and pedagogical formats, in which the decision-making and resource management are often based in Europe or



the United States. Today's challenge is to reflect with voices that have been subalternized and thus break the models and practices that are intended to be hegemonic (Ocoró Loango, 2021). An example of this process is the chapter by Andrea Rizzotti and Sophia Pekowsky.

The authors debate the common practice of banning student attendance at public political demonstrations in study abroad programs as a jumping-off point for discussing the neoliberal attempt to exclude politics from IE through rigid safety standards. Drawing from their experience working in Buenos Aires, Argentina, they propose a “pedagogy of being involved” as an intercultural and decolonial practice that encourages engaged, sustainable, and flexible security protocols that prioritize safety while still allowing students to make meaningful connections with the socio-political atmosphere of the host country.

## Looking Toward the Future

Throughout all of these chapters, the critical intercultural vision is intertwined with the decolonial. From this point of view, we differentiate ourselves from the positions that view interculturality as a way of acknowledging individual techniques to manage emotions that lead to what we call “emotional literacy” (Nobile, 2018). Then the main goal is to strengthen self-knowledge, individual and meritocratic initiative as a vehicle for change, optimism as a permanent state of emotionality, leadership, and the ability to negotiate and influence others as a way to maximize participation in the labor market and the economy (Felitti-Rizzotti, 2018). These perspectives of interculturality combine perfectly with neoliberal and transnational projects where the individual takes precedence over the collective and the search for maximum productivity is the primary reason for the disciplining of emotions.

Walsh (2017) discussed the functional perspective<sup>1</sup> of interculturality, which speaks of tolerating and advocating for cultural diversity without discussing inequality. She argues, rather, for a critical interculturality, in which cultural diversity is made visible along with the power dynamics that work to silence or devalue certain racial or cultural groups. Critical interculturality seeks not only the coexistence of diverse groups but also social justice and change.

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<sup>1</sup> The functional category derives from theoretical frameworks in sociology that characterize actions (at the individual or social level) as sustaining the established order, which is why they are considered “functional” to the current system.

We believe that it is necessary to recover in all educational spaces the socio-cultural nature of emotions and the acquisition of skills for personal and collective development. We believe that IE can contribute significantly to these processes if we understand that in the intersectionality between the intercultural and the decolonial lies the possibility of not reducing emotions and experiences to merely individualistic and malleable issues. For this reason, it is important to encourage the active participation of students in the pedagogical process in a way that results in rewarding and awareness-raising educational experiences (Nobile, 2018).

Finally, we invite the reader to think about decolonial pedagogies that explore rich histories of struggle, resistance, and fights for acknowledgment in the collective memory. We search for a horizon of hope and life, creating projects that can inspire change (Walsh, 2017), in search of establishing equitable relationships and ensuring dignity for all parties involved.

Walsh, Garcia Linera, and Mignolo (2006) affirm that the logic of coloniality operates on three different levels: the coloniality of power (political and economic); the coloniality of knowledge (epistemological, philosophical, scientific) and the coloniality of being (subjectivity, control of sexuality, gender roles, etc.) For this reason, the decolonial turn requires a shedding of the corset of the categories of thought that naturalize the coloniality of knowledge and being and the justification in the rhetoric of modernity, progress, and development. An inclusive IE is possible if we advance into the rupture of these colonial models and, as we previously stated, start to include and value every voice in the field to create an open and hopeful dialogue.

Contextualized historic consciousness, based on the theories of Paulo Freire (2012), brings us to a transformative social practice that is expressed in diverse ways in each chapter of this publication. We understand that experiences of academic exchange affect us all individually, but that they also happen in a collective reality, one much wider than that which is created in the confines of a class or one particular study abroad program.

We understand, therefore, that decolonial pedagogies could be possible to implement if all of the stakeholders involved in IE were not only listened to but also, and more importantly, valued equally. These discourses of equality should not aim to hide structural differences but make them visible to remedy them. We search for a critical and intercultural dialogue that brings us to a decolonial practice as a way to strengthen the potential that IE has in an increasingly complex and uncertain global context.

Through this dialogue, we hope to pave the way to creativity, solidarity, and commitment, as well as to an IE that could positively incorporate diversity, not only at a surface level but as a way to inform and enrich the work we do.

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**Chapter Title:** Transformative Experiences to Frame a Decolonial Approach to International Education: Insights from a Study Abroad Program in India

**Authors:** Anitha Ramanna

**Date:** 2023

**Page numbers:** 120-139

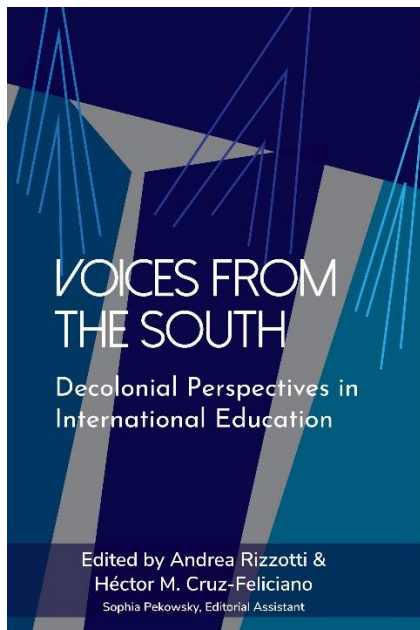
**DOI:** 10.36.366/SIA.3.978-1-952376-32-0.7

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**How to cite this chapter:**

Ramanna, A. (2023). "Transformative Experiences to Frame a Decolonial Approach to International Education: Insights from a Study Abroad Program in India." In A. Rizzotti & H.M. Cruz-Feliciano (Eds.), *Voices from the South: Decolonial Perspectives in International Education* (pp. 120-139). The Forum on Education Abroad. 10.36.366/SIA.3.978-1-952376-32-0.

**This chapter appears in:**



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# 7

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## Transformative Experiences to Frame a Decolonial Approach to International Education: Insights from a Study Abroad Program in India

*Anitha Ramanna*

### Introduction

Study abroad programs have the potential to lead to transformative growth among students by changing perspectives, challenging preconceived beliefs, and enabling deep reflection. This chapter focuses on the ways in which transformative experiences can promote a broader and more inclusive view of development through the lens of stakeholders in the Global South. Transformative Learning Theory, proposed by Mezirow (1991), asserts that “disorienting dilemmas” or experiences that do not fit into a person’s current views about the world lead to transformation and growth.

Applying this to a case study of an immersive program in India, this study analyses the impact of students being taken out of their comfort zone and faced with a “disorienting dilemma” while in another country. Analyzing the experience of students who participated in a humanitarian engineering study abroad program in India, the study describes the way in which transformative learning experiences shaped students’ perspectives on development, placing

greater value on local knowledge and finding solutions that combined modern techniques with local wisdom. These insights led students to approach their projects in different ways, often challenging colonial perspectives.

Student video testimonials are utilized to provide narratives of their experiences and transformative growth. The study summarizes lessons for program design and highlights ways in which study abroad programs can be structured to contribute to decolonizing international education.

## Methodology and Research Questions

The main research questions raised in this study are:

- What are the experiences in study abroad that can help promote transformative change among students by providing different perspectives that challenge colonial assumptions?
- How did students in the case study of the humanitarian engineering program in India revise their development narratives as a result of their experiences within the projects they were involved in?
- What lessons does this provide for designing study abroad programs in ways that contribute to building a decolonial approach to international education?

I aim to answer these questions through a case study of a program in India focused on humanitarian engineering fieldwork. The study abroad program involved students from the University of Sydney working on projects with organizations in Pune, India, in 2019. Data from the design of the program and its components are utilized to understand the structure of the program.

The projects and the nature of the problem they aim to address are situated in a development context. The process employed by the students to address the problem and the learnings gained through the experience are evaluated to understand the students' changing views of development. Excerpts from student video testimonials also provide key data used to recognize the transformative change students experienced.

## Theoretical Framework

I apply transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) and analysis of study abroad derived from the post-colonial paradigm (Ogden, 2008) to understand student experiences that led to changing perceptions about development.

Transformative Learning Theory, proposed by Mezirow (1991), asserts that “disorienting dilemmas” or experiences that do not fit into a person’s current views about the world lead to transformation and growth. Being placed in uncomfortable situations, along with reflection and active learning, enables people to develop their understanding of the world and themselves, thereby encouraging potential changes in perspectives (Strange & Gibson, 2017).

Applying this to study abroad, when students are taken out of their comfort zone and faced with a “disorienting dilemma” while in another country, there is the potential for transformative change. According to Perry, Stoner, and Tarrant (2012), “exposure to new places, cultures, and learning environments where a students’ preconceived and established notions and beliefs are tested may act as the catalyst or impetus for bringing forth (sic) a transformative experience within study abroad experiences.” McKeown (2009) similarly recognized the profound change in students’ values when experiencing a new social environment that may question their internal beliefs and referred to this as the “first-time effect” (see also Tarrant, 2010).

It must be noted here that experiences themselves are not adequate to create a transformative experience; reflection, critical analysis, and questioning are fundamental for developing new worldviews (Perry, Stoner, & Tarrant, 2012). I utilize transformative learning theory to understand the ways in which students were pushed outside of their comfort zone through their study abroad experience. I analyze how students’ interactions with project beneficiaries led to different perspectives on development and the design of their projects.

Ogden (2008) focuses on study abroad, describing the “colonial student” as one who “wants to be abroad and take full advantage of all the benefits studying abroad offers, but is not necessarily open to experiencing the less desirable side of being there.” Comparing this type of student to colonial travellers, Ogden points out how they experience new cultures “as new commodities to be coveted and owned.” He asserts that international educators need to find a way to motivate students to step out of their comfort zones and encourage them to “get off the veranda” and engage with local culture.

We utilize Ogden’s analysis to understand how students within the case study were able to immerse themselves within their projects, experiencing situations that they had never been in before. We evaluate the program components that encouraged students to do this and how this led to deconstructing colonial myths. In addition, we utilize decolonial theories to point out ways in which study abroad programs can be designed to challenge colonial perspectives on development.

## Background to India Humanitarian Engineering Program

The Global Engineering Fieldwork is a unit of study offered under the Humanitarian Engineering Major for undergraduate students at the University of Sydney, Australia. Humanitarian engineering is defined by the university as “the application of engineering to meet the needs of communities globally, while maintaining a focus on sustainability and appropriateness.” The fieldwork unit will require students to demonstrate an applied use of engineering skills, cross-cultural competence, effective communication, resilience, and an ability to work closely in teams.

The learning outcomes for the course most relevant for this study are listed in Table 1.

We focus on the fieldwork component conducted as part of this course in 2019 in Pune, India. The fieldwork was implemented by Authentica, an experiential learning company based in India that designs and delivers short-term academic programs globally. The fieldwork was for 18 days in Pune, India, and essentially focused on project-based learning.

Students were divided into groups of about 4–6 students and assigned one organization and project to focus on. The organizations and projects were identified by Authentica staff and finalized in consultation with the faculty. The projects were carefully scoped using Authentica’s PEIS (Physical, Emotional, Intellectual, and Spiritual) framework.

The PEIS framework aims to provide a foundation for ensuring programs lead to enriching lives in all four dimensions. The physical component focuses on promoting participant wellness and adaptability to diverse environments; the emotional aspect focuses on ensuring interconnectedness and kinship with local communities; the intellectual level aims to ensure growth

**Table 1:** Learning Outcomes.

Learning Outcomes for Global Engineering Fieldwork Program
Express clearly the interplay and contradictions between theory and practice
Use a variety of forms of communication to express relevant experiences and analyses
Express self-analysis in a way that is relevant to the audience
Synthesize information from a variety of sources, and make sound decisions about this information based on relevance and reliability
Identify human issues and local constraints, and design appropriate solutions
Analyze the process of implementing an engineering solution, and the ability to create better project outcomes by improving the process
Apply specialized engineering knowledge to propose improvements in the delivery of humanitarian and developmental projects



in knowledge and skills and attitudes that would help students in their lives; and the spiritual piece focuses on broadening perspectives.

These components are utilized to identify and define projects in ways that enable students to experience growth along these dimensions. The projects challenge students to adapt to different situations, deeply connect with communities, apply knowledge and skills for problem solving, and widen their worldviews.

Once the organizations were identified and projects defined, the students selected the projects and teams they would like to work on based on their backgrounds and interests. The program consisted of various components, including sessions for the entire group along with the actual project work that they conducted in their respective teams. The sessions included orientation and language sessions, exposure visits to get an overview of sectors such as sanitation or water, and cultural immersions.

An empathy mapping workshop was also held that used an interactive exercise where students were divided into their respective teams and had to fill out an empathy map focused on their project. The project work included field studies and meetings with stakeholders for students to come up with design solutions. A debriefing session was also conducted at the end of the project to enable students to reflect on their learning.

### Fieldwork Projects: Shifting Perceptions of Development among Students

This section provides a brief overview of the organizations and projects that students worked on during their fieldwork. It highlights the ways in which students' perceptions of development changed as they tried to find solutions to the problems posed by the projects. The names of the organizations have been omitted to maintain confidentiality.

There were six organizations and a total of nine projects, as some organizations had more than one project. A total of 32 students were divided among all the projects into teams of 3–4 members. I focus here in depth on three of the projects and provide an overview of some of the other projects.

#### *Project 1. Design/Recommend Cost-Effective Design Solutions to Make the School on Wheels Bus Comfortable to be In/Operate from in the Summer Months*

The School on Wheels is a program run by an organization that focuses on providing education to children who may not have the opportunity to attend school regularly, such as the children of migrant workers in areas such as construction sites. The bus is redesigned and equipped to serve as a classroom

on wheels with supplies such as audio-visual aids and learning materials. The bus is taken to about 2–3 locations per day, and two-hour sessions are held in each location. The bus reaches out to children in certain locations or at construction sites where even a temporary classroom cannot be built, and therefore children have absolutely no access to education.

One of the main problems the organization was facing was the bus having to withstand harsh weather conditions, including extreme heat in the summer months or heavy rainfall during the monsoon seasons. The project required students to find design solutions so that the students and teachers within the bus would be as comfortable as possible during these seasons.

While classes were being held on the bus, the students visited the school on wheels bus in a variety of locations. These site visits presented a “disorienting dilemma” to students as they were faced with a type of classroom interaction they had never witnessed before. One student describes how she could not have imagined exactly how hot these buses could get, and the visit itself led her to think more about the conditions the students faced.

She stated, “It was a different classroom environment from anything we would have ever seen at home. I think once we stepped on the bus, we realized how hot and humid it is in that environment. How necessary it is to put these modifications in. The students would be sitting there for two hours and then trying to learn on top of that, and that is a very difficult environment to work in.” Another student narrated the dilemma she faced when she saw students walking towards the bus in very muddy conditions. She felt it was a very difficult situation but was surprised to see that the children seemed okay with it. She wanted to ask if they wanted some solution or improvement, but then again, she was not sure if she would be able to provide one.

The students interacted with the children and teachers and tried to better understand their challenges. They realized that solutions such as putting in air conditioning in the bus, which would have been what would have first come to mind in the West, was not a viable solution here. Not only was it expensive and difficult to maintain in such conditions, but it was just not appropriate for this situation.

The issue that needed to be looked into was air circulation, rather than only finding ways to reduce the heat. They also started looking into solutions that would be low-cost and could utilize locally available materials. This led them to over 15 different types of solutions, which they ultimately narrowed down to about 10. The solutions included easy and low-cost options such as:

- installing a fan on the roof of the bus to improve air circulation that could also be turned off or covered during heavy rain

- retractable awnings on the sides of the bus that provide adequate shade, while still allowing sunlight to read
- painting the roof of the bus white, as that has been proven to reduce heat
- using locally available detachable window screens, and durable easy-to-clean carpets cut to the shape required to fit the bus

When the solutions were presented to the organization, they were extremely impressed with the simplicity and ease of the solutions. They pointed out that earlier, whenever they consulted anyone on the issue, the suggestion that was provided was air conditioning. They were even thinking perhaps they had to spend the money on air conditioning, but the solutions provided by the students were much more relevant.

The students' perception of development underwent a change as they came to understand that using low-cost, locally available materials and easy-to-implement solutions was more feasible. We can perceive a shift from a more Western-oriented view of development to one that is based on a more Gandhian perspective. Gandhian-based approaches assert the need for low-cost local solutions over technologically expensive alternatives adopted from advanced countries.

One student described how this project led her to simpler solutions, whereas University studies focused on complex ideas: "There are plenty of simple solutions out there that are easy to implement and thinking about those instead of having to worry about complex solutions which I think is what we are encouraged to study at University...think complex.... think next level, whereas now it's kind of getting back to the basics." We can perceive here a focus on how sustainability is a more relevant factor in developing solutions to problems than trying to derive complex answers as prescribed in standard education.

*Project 2. Design/Recommend Cost-Effective Solutions for Livelihood Projects  
Converting Dry Garden Waste to Biochar, Which then can be Filled into Bags  
and Sold as Deodorizer Bags*

The organization intended to promote these biochar deodorizer bags as a livelihood option for workers involved in waste and for farmers who had garden waste that could be utilized. Biochar is a charcoal-like substance that's made by burning organic material from agricultural and forestry wastes (Regeneration International, 2018). The main aim of the organization is to focus on clean technologies based on biomass fuels.

They felt that providing such an option for marginalized groups would enable them to earn income through better waste management.

The organization would provide them with the skills and the bags to produce these biochar bags.

The main problem facing the organization with this project was that they needed a way to precisely measure the amount of biochar that should be filled into one bag. This was required to ensure standardization when marketing and selling the bags. In addition, as this would be a side occupation to their main income source, it had to be a method that was quick and efficient. The organization suggested that the students develop a dispenser machine similar to the ones found in Western countries.

The students visited and interviewed a farmer who would be one of the potential users of the dispenser to make biochar deodorizer bags. This site visit proved crucial in shaping the design and thinking of the students. As one of the students in the project narrated, visiting the farmer's family was the most significant interaction as it helped them understand the main issue faced by farmers.

The farmer explained to them that he was filling the bags with spoons and that this was an inaccurate and slow process. He also had to wait five days for the char to cool down before filling the bags, which wasted time and mass as the wind carried away some of it. They realized that a dispenser-type machine would not only be expensive but would also not be portable or easy to use and maintain for the farmer.

After studying the issue more in depth, the students understood that a simple hand-held measuring scoop would be a much more effective design for this purpose. They designed a simple scoop that could be made from easily available materials and demonstrated that using the right design, they could precisely measure the amount of biochar needed to fill a bag. In addition, as it was a hand-held device that could be easily stored and utilized anywhere, it had an extremely user-friendly design. They also suggested a plunger that could help cool down the char quicker—within a few hours rather than the five days it took earlier—before he could fill the biochar bags.

Student perceptions of development influenced their project outcome, and we can also see how their views were revised based on their interactions. The students pointed out that the interaction and visit to the farmer's site were crucial for their understanding of the project design. Rather than providing a solution based on what was found in Western countries, the students focused on enhancing the capability of the user, an approach that echoes Amartya Sen's capability approach to development.

Sen's approach focuses on people and their capabilities rather than on goods and resources. Development is viewed as an expansion of people's capabilities and the removal of major forms of constraint (Walker, 2005). Development is viewed as an increase in a person's options and ability to live

the life they value. The students' approach to the project design embodied this view, and thus a design emerged that the organization was able to implement immediately.

### *Project 3. Toilet Design for Schools Serving Lower-Income Groups*

The project involved providing a design that the organization could present to the local government to improve the toilet facilities in the schools. The schools were located in low-income areas. Lack of adequate toilet facilities was found to be a major deterrent for school attendance, particularly for female students.

The organization was interested in providing a design solution that could be implemented in schools across Pune. There were several problems facing the organization in evolving suitable designs, including a lack of continuous water supply, a lack of maintenance equipment, and a lack of awareness of hygiene.

The students' site visits to the schools proved eye-opening. The standards of the current toilet facilities were shocking and something the students had never seen before. One student stated, "Initially, when I saw the condition of the toilets, I was upset, and then I got really angry at it, and I was like, 'this is disgusting; it shouldn't be like this'."

One student pointed out how the team felt when they saw these toilets and expressed that "I would probably just not use these facilities." However, after some reflection, the team stepped back and realized why they were doing this project, which changed their attitude. The students initially felt that they only needed one site visit and would then come up with the design.

However, they realized the problem was much more complex. According to one student, "When we had our site visit, I went in with the mindset that we'll see what the issue is, like maybe take a few measurements, and we'll think of a solution." "We only need one site visit... and after doing our initial visits, we came back and started to discuss it, and we realized how multifaceted the problem is and why it's still such a big issue in the schools, and since then, we've gone back to the schools and drawn up questionnaires to ask the teachers and students to see what they see as the issues and then comparing it to what we see as the issues." The students initially thought they would bring solutions they were used to seeing in the West. However, interaction with the students led them to suggest very different solutions.

As one student narrated, "We will go in, we will put in Western toilets, and we'll put down toilet paper." And then talking to the students, it's like at home they don't have a Western toilet; they don't use toilet paper. It's like we can provide all of these amenities, but they are not going to use them and I think we need to provide something that they do use at home or used to using but

in a cleaner, more sanitary version. “Of course, installing Indian-style toilets, as well as additional taps and urinals.” They suggested designs that would ensure less wastage of water: taps located at different levels to cater to various ages of students; privacy barriers, especially for female students; and installing sanitary napkin dispensers in the toilets.

The design solutions and their perceptions of what would be best for the students changed through the process of interaction with the students. The students not only circulated questionnaires among the students and teachers, but they also spent long hours near the toilets in the schools to observe the behavior, frequency, and timing of usage, etc. Such interaction was undoubtedly difficult and can be interpreted as a means of getting students off the veranda.

Their understanding of how to promote development went from one that used Western solutions to one that focused on local needs and solutions. Almost all of the projects experienced learning and perception shifts. Table 2 summarizes the results.

**Table 2:** Shift in Perceptions of Development through Project Implementation.

Projects	Shift in Perceptions of Development
Design/recommend cost-effective design solutions to make the School on Wheels bus comfortable to be in/operate from in the summer months	Realized that Western solutions such as air-conditioning were not feasible and therefore suggested many affordable and easy-to-implement solutions using local materials. Shift from Western-oriented notion of development to a more Gandhian perspective.
Design/recommend cost-effective solutions for livelihood projects converting dry garden waste to biochar, which then can be filled into bags and sold as deodorizer bags	NGO initially suggested an automated device to fill biochar bags. Students' interaction with farmers led them to a much simpler and cost-effective design that focused on the capability of the user. Shift in development perspective toward Sen's capability approach.
Toilet design for schools serving lower-income groups	Realized that Western type toilets and amenities would not be utilized or maintained and therefore suggested modified Indian toilet designs focusing on privacy, safety, and catering to small children. Realized need for awareness building and suggested posters for education. Shift in development perspective more toward user needs.
Analyze the emissions generated from their sanitary waste disposal machine and recommend ways to reduce/mitigate them	In addition to suggestions for reducing emissions, students realized that awareness and the type of pad that is inserted in the machine is very important. Therefore, suggested posters for awareness as well as to place a sanitary dispenser next to the machine that would carry the right type of pad so as to reduce emissions. Shift toward a development perspective that is broader and focuses on all aspects of the issue.

(Continued)

*(Continued)*

Projects	Shift in Perceptions of Development
Design creches for children of lower income female workers working in challenging conditions	Realized that the design of the creche cannot replicate what is found in modern/Western situations. Therefore, suggested a creche kit that could be easily portable and could be assembled as and when required. Development approach focused on enhancing the capability of the teacher.
Design solution to facilitate garbage collection from challenging locations	Realized after interaction with residents and the garbage truck driver that the issue wasn't getting the garbage to the driver as initially thought, but rather with the inability of the driver to accommodate the load and navigate the terrain. Therefore, suggested design for lightweight machines that could be used to compress the garbage making it possible to accommodate it in the truck. Development approach that focused on enhancing the capability of the driver and address the real issue.

### The Process of Developing Solutions through Community Interactions

It is important to note the process that led students to develop these solutions. Communities were engaged in the discussion and development of the solutions, so there was a spirit of co-creation throughout the program. For example, in the School on Wheels (Project 1), students visited various sites where the buses were stationed to serve as schools.

They observed a typical day where students came into the bus, seated themselves, and were then taught by the teachers. The students interacted with the students and teachers and discussed the constraints and difficulties they faced while conducting sessions on the bus. Their explanations of how the weather (heat, rain) affected their comfort and exactly what their pain points were led them to clearly understand what problems needed to be solved.

After one session, the students were taken to see the homes of the students who attended the classes. Interactions with family members provided them with insight into their living conditions and helped them better understand what types of solutions were available. They noticed that simple structures were used in these slum dwellings rather than expensive solutions such as air conditioners.

These visits and interactions were extremely important in enabling students to devise relevant solutions. In addition, as the students worked in teams, there was also a process through which they negotiated and agreed to solutions as a group.

Students' interactions and discussions with users were a crucial part of the process. As students interacted with the communities, they realized that

the solutions they would have normally proposed had they been back home would just not be workable. They even understood the problem differently as they spoke with the communities.

Here we can point out the process undertaken by one of the groups that were designing a solution for picking up garbage from difficult terrain. Initially, the NGO and students thought the problem was that residents of the area found it difficult to put out the garbage at a specific time and that the truck driver found it hard to navigate the terrain. However, after discussions with the truck driver, they realized the problem was more that the truck was small and could not accommodate the amount of garbage generated easily.

The students thought of a solution: a garbage compactor that the driver could place on his truck, but when they went to the truck driver with this design, he rejected it. He pointed out that this compactor was too heavy for his truck and wouldn't provide a feasible option for him. The students went back to the drawing board and discussed several options for how to create a compactor that would be of lesser weight and size.

Through discussions with each other, they proposed various solutions and then discussed the feasibilities of each. This led to rejecting some and focusing on those that seemed most relevant. Students gave interim presentations at the midpoint of their projects, where faculty, heads of organizations, and others provided valuable feedback on their proposed designs.

This enabled them to have a checkpoint with the organizations to understand what had been tried before and what solutions seemed most suitable for them. They also went back to the users with their solutions to understand whether these would really solve the problems they faced.

This iterative process between users, NGO leaders, faculty, and other team members served as a completely different form of education than the one found within the classroom. Brazilian educator Paulo Friere points out the importance of an open exchange of ideas to create knowledge. He promoted a liberating education as opposed to what he termed "banking education," where the teacher is regarded as the "owner" of knowledge and the student as a passive recipient of what the teacher transmits.

The process is analogous to a banking transaction: the client (teacher) makes a deposit, and the bank's (student) job is to hold it in a safe place. The knowledge that students gained through this interactive process resulted from an open exchange of ideas rather than something transmitted from the teacher to the student. This learning method can be seen as a way to deconstruct and adopt a decolonial approach to education, making it more relevant for students as well as for communities and organizations.



## Transformative Experiences: Student Video Testimonials

At the end of the program, the students were interviewed using open-ended questions, and the interviews were video recorded. These testimonials provide important insights into how students perceive the transformative change they experienced.

### *Perceptions about India*

One of the main areas where we see students experiencing change is in their perception of India. According to one student, “Everything I had been told about India was so wrong in the best way possible. Everybody I met has been so friendly and so welcoming, and I didn’t expect that.” Other students also pointed out how coming to India was a culture shock and that they initially felt unsure about going out on their own, but their experience led them to be much more confident and perceptive: “It’s very different from home, a very different culture and way of life. One of the things I found startling was someone crossing the road. Lots of traffic and noise. It took a while to adjust to the crowds. I think one of the main differences is definitely culture shock. I was a bit unsure how it would go, but everyone has been really friendly, and most people are just curious to know where you are from. Now I am starting to get more confident and go out on my own. People tend to look at you more. Initially, I took that as a safety concern, but now I just see it as curiosity. It doesn’t faze me as much.”

### *Broader World Views*

The students also stated that their views of the world broadened, and their realization that at our core we are all the same was revealing. They also grappled with how to interpret and analyze the different views: “Something we saw is that children are the same in any country, be it Sri Lanka, India, Australia, or any other country... So we understood that at the core of it, we are all the same; it’s just that we are exposed to different places, so it influences who we are... However, what we considered acceptable varies depending on where you are from... Some students thought something was acceptable.... and us coming from different backgrounds also had different interpretations of the standards. That’s when you understand that what you have been exposed to changes your interpretation, and sometimes even though people are ok with something, it’s definitely not something to settle for... they may be satisfied, but if it’s substandard, it’s not ok. It’s something big this project has shown and probably something we should realize in everyday life.”

Another student stated: “I think going somewhere new, experiencing a different culture, makes you feel humble in yourself and also that there are others out there much bigger than your own little bubble.” Another student pointed out: “... the biggest barrier has been culturally... like I can provide a solution and so can the rest of my group, but for us, what we see as a priority is different from what the kids see as a priority... so for me, I think that’s been the hardest thing.” Students also pointed out how they had not thought of issues such as waste management in such a context before: “I think one of the main things is that it has given me a bigger perspective. I noticed that waste is a very big issue. Something that I don’t really see as much at home. I think that was quite eye-opening for me. I think that is one thing I have started to reflect on while being here. But all these initiatives that organizations are taking are making an impact and trying. I had no idea it was a problem before.” Another student reiterates that visiting an organization and “just seeing how much they do for the environment... that was surprising being aware of waste.”

#### *Personal and Professional Learning and Transformation*

The acquisition of skills such as communication, listening, and empathy were highlighted by the students. One student stated: “I learned that good communication is really essential. If you don’t communicate well, they are not going to understand whatever you are saying, and a lot of things could happen. I learned that sometimes you have to stand up and say what you have to say rather than being discouraged from communicating.”

Another student said they learned to “listen carefully to what other people are suggesting, because it’s always helpful, even if it contradicts what you have been trying to say as well.” One student elaborates her experience about empathy: “I think so; initially, I was like, oh it’s so easy to be empathetic; obviously, I care about these people. But, like you were saying before, sympathy and empathy are so easy to get mixed up. For me, it’s been about listening to the children’s and the teacher’s needs, putting myself in that situation as best as I can, and think like where have I been in this situation before? How have I felt? How has that situation been resolved and kind of trying to implement that for them. I think whatever field you are in, whether it’s engineering or business, you need that in order to effectively do your job.”

Another student felt they gained greater problem-solving skills: “I feel like I have gained greater skills in terms of how I approach and solve issues. I would have never been able to use my knowledge to figure out how to solve

such a problem. Better problem-solving skills. I learned how to research issues in a different country and how the government functions there.”

Another student contrasted the learning with university: “Through the past three years, I haven’t had much experience in the field. We have either been working with civil engineers but not as deeply... kind of instructive... putting myself a bit out of my comfort zone and also having a sense of responsibility... I didn’t really think that beforehand, and now I have come to the sense that the NGOs that we have been working with have really given us a project and a sense of responsibility and want us to solve an issue. It’s kind of eye-opening to be given that experience. The responsibility came to me as quite eye-opening because I thought they would be holding your hand along the way... like they do in university, but they have just given us this issue, this problem, and just go and try to figure it out. They have also been very helpful in instructing us in some sort of direction.”

### *The Importance of User Perspective in Project Design*

Some of the biggest learning experienced by the students were about how to implement the projects in a way that incorporates the users’ perspectives. “There is an ideal world where there are lots of stuff we can do but you have to think about what’s realistic in all the constraints we have got. The biggest learning for me has been making sure you understand the context. At university, a lot of the stuff we do is theoretical; so, to be able to actually kind of find a real solution to a real problem as opposed to just an answer in a textbook where it’s already there. It’s exciting.”

Another student narrates: “I am starting to understand the way of thinking and how they view things... they try to find the easiest, the cheapest way instead of like the best way sometimes it’s not the best but it’s quite effective and cheap so why not do a bit of a trade-off there.” One student pointed out their biggest takeaway: “I think that the solution isn’t always as obvious as you think it is. Like I said before, it’s so easy to go in and say well I have seen this implemented before so we will just do that. That’s simple but obviously that’s been done. People have come in before—it is not like we are pioneering this. People have come and tried to implement things but they have failed either in the design or the upkeep and maintenance. It’s like you need to think of all these considerations when you do a design. We can make a design that will have a lasting impact or maybe a design that will be functional for a couple of weeks and it falls apart.”

## A Decolonial Approach to International Education: Lessons for Program Design

Study abroad programs can enable transformative change in students that leads them to develop a more inclusive and decolonial view of development. For this to occur, however, the program needs to be effectively designed and provide avenues for students to move out of their comfort zones. The student need to “step off the veranda” and immerse themselves in the situation to understand the problems faced by the local communities.

This case study of a humanitarian engineering program in India demonstrated that there are ways in which programs can be designed to ensure beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders. Some of the lessons we can draw for program design are listed below.

### *Designing Projects to Carefully Promote Student Learning*

Project selection and design are crucial for effective program implementation. It is important to choose projects that clearly focus on current problems faced by communities or organizations. The relevance of the project as well as the factors contributing to the problem can be understood when students can themselves see the actual constraints.

The users can also describe their situation much more effectively when it is a current problem they are facing. A second important factor is selecting projects that provide holistic experiences. The PEIS framework mentioned earlier provides a criterion on which to select projects effectively.

Projects should challenge students at the PEIS levels. Thirdly, projects must be carefully selected in such a way that they enable students to draw on familiar concepts and knowledge frameworks that they understand and apply them to new situations. As Ogden (2008) points out, when students are slightly challenged beyond their comfort zones, the results can be transformative, but if the students are faced with too much complexity too soon, it may not result in a favorable outcome.

In this humanitarian engineering program, for example, students could balance their experience by utilizing both concepts and knowledge they were familiar with to understand problems in a totally new environment. Finally, delving into the project must enable students to grapple with the surrounding economic and social factors leading to the problems facing the communities. This provides students with a means to adopt a decolonial perspective.

As Chaput and O’Sullivan (2013) noted, educating for global citizenship has much less to do with a student’s exposure to different people, places, and

cultures than it does with placing students in an experience in which “new knowledges are engaged, placed in relationship to one’s own experience, and entered into a deliberative framework that leads to a deeper appreciation of global interdependence and world mindedness” (quoted in Sharpe, 2015). This also upholds the *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad* (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020). The Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad provide clear guidelines for designing and implementing study abroad programs. While the entire set of standards is relevant for study abroad, we can focus on some important standards outlined in the section on Student Learning and Development (Section 6), which are divided into before the program, during the program, and after the program.

Pre-program, the standards encourage parties to prepare students to engage ethically and to consider the local context. Clause 6.1.9. states, “Responsible parties shall prepare participants to navigate the cultural transition and to engage in culturally relevant, ethical, and reciprocally beneficial activities in relation to the local context.” During the program, the standards focus on ensuring respectful interactions with local communities. Clause 6.2.5 states, “Responsible parties shall support students to interact in a respectful, ethical, mindful, and sustainable way in the local community.” The sub-clause, 6.2.5.1, adds, “Responsible parties can provide students with opportunities to reflect on the social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts of their activities.” After the program the standards point out the importance of encouraging continued contact with local communities. Clause 6.3.6 states, “Responsible parties should encourage continuing local and global engagement in culturally relevant, ethical, and reciprocally beneficial activities.”

### *Approaching Projects as Cooperative Endeavor Between Communities and Students*

Projects should be approached as collaborative efforts rather than as students providing solutions or answers to communities. The interactions with users and target groups are extremely important here. In the case of the projects in this study, these interactions led students to question their assumptions and beliefs about existing designs they were familiar with. The students realized that what may work in the West may not be suitable in the context of a developing country.

They also understood that their framework at the university focused on complex solutions, whereas in this context the solutions required were more practical and user-centric. The continuous exchange between students,

organization leaders, faculty, and users was crucial. The students consulted with their organization leaders frequently and understood the context they were working in.

Visiting and working in their offices with the organization enabled them to clearly see the limitations these organizations were working with. This was key to getting students out of their comfort zone and “off the veranda.” As Ogden (2008) points out, designing field trips and exchanges with local communities may not foster a sense of reciprocity within the community.

Rather, if the local community perceives the benefits of hosting international students, they are inclined to be involved in the exchange and thus endorse future integration within their community (Allen et al., 1993). In this program, the communities could sense that interactions with the students could provide benefits that were in tune with their needs. The student’s interactions and discussions with the communities were based on concrete problems, and the conversations could be more genuine and focused.

The students were drawn into the interactions with the community because their ability to design effective solutions required such exchanges. This forced the students to come out of their comfort zones and delve deep into the problems faced by the communities.

This frequent interaction with local communities enabled students to approach projects as cooperative endeavors and not as “givers” to the community. This lays the groundwork for developing a more decolonial perspective rather than creating an unequal dynamic in interactions with the community. Rather, they are engaging in a process of mutual learning and dialogue to solve and understand a problem, echoing Freire’s (1992) view of an open exchange of ideas to create knowledge.

In addition, this opens up the space for designing solutions that respect and include the views of communities. The decolonial approach to education can be fostered here by not imposing one “scientific” view but rather providing an “equality of opportunities” to different kinds of knowledge, as promoted by Santos (2007). This can also lead to, as Santos (2007) outlines, maximizing the contributions of different types of knowledge to decolonize knowledge and power.

### *Defining Clear Learning Objectives, Outcomes, and Preparation*

It is important to have a very clear understanding of what exactly the student stands to gain as a result of the program. In this case, the main aim was clearly defined as enabling students to apply engineering to meet the needs

of the community. Projects were clearly defined with a scope that suited the duration of the program.

The students were provided information about the project and the organization prior to the program. One student narrated how, because they were provided a clear idea of their project and what the organization's objective was before they came, it really helped them execute the project. One of the key sessions held prior to students delving into their projects focused on empathy.

In this workshop, an empathy map with questions carefully designed to focus on the specific project was provided to the students. The students worked in teams to try to answer the questions by placing themselves in the position of those for whom they were designing. This led them to question many aspects of the project and raise issues that they would need to tackle prior to finding the relevant solutions.

This workshop was extremely important as it laid the framework for how students approached their projects. It is important to design and apply relevant frameworks within which students can situate the program.

## Conclusion

Study abroad programs can provide a transformative experience for students. They can be framed to promote “disorienting dilemmas” and enable students to deconstruct their worldviews and adapt decolonial perspectives. Through careful program design and implementation, students can be pushed toward “stepping off the veranda” (Ogden, 2008).

A thoughtful selection of projects focused on the perspectives of local communities and organizations and approached as a collective endeavor involving the local communities are key factors in ensuring such outcomes. Studying abroad can be a valuable vantage point for students to revise, reframe, and revisit their internal beliefs and values by being challenged with new experiences.

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**Chapter Title:** Centering Afro-Colombian Narratives by Exploring Critical Theories and the Complexities of Identity in Study Abroad

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**Date:** 2023

**Page numbers:** 97-119

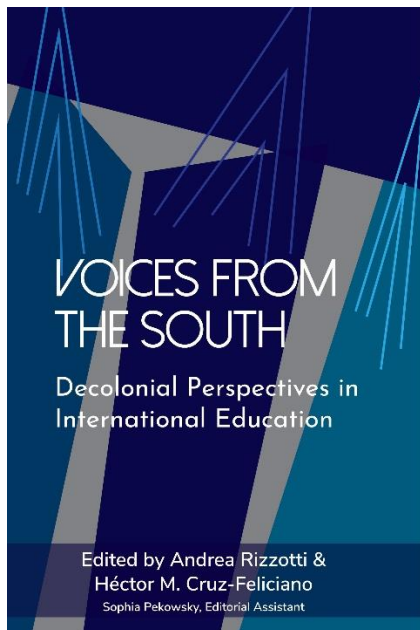
**DOI:** 10.36.366/SIA.3.978-1-952376-32-0.6

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#### How to cite this chapter:

Lugo-Vivas, D.A., McCall, C., & Cortés-Ruiz, P.L. (2023). "Centering Afro-Colombian Narratives by Exploring Critical Theories and the Complexities of Identity in Study Abroad." In A. Rizzotti & H.M. Cruz-Feliciano (Eds.), *Voices from the South: Decolonial Perspectives in International Education* (pp. 120-139). The Forum on Education Abroad. 10.36.366/SIA.3.978-1-952376-32-0.

#### This chapter appears in:



For more information about this volume, visit: <https://www.forumea.org/voices-from-the-south.html>

# 6

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## Centering Afro-Colombian Narratives by Exploring Critical Theories and the Complexities of Identity in Study Abroad

**Diego Andrés Lugo-Vivas, Cyntoya McCall and Pedro León Cortés-Ruiz**

In this chapter, we describe and critically discuss the experiences in the development of a study abroad program in Cali, Colombia. Our focus is on the mobility of students from historically marginalized and underrepresented groups enrolled in U.S. universities who play a role in cross-cultural conversations, primarily with Afro-Colombian communities. This contribution comes at a crucial time.

The evolution of a pandemic that has transformed the livelihoods of millions around the world and the crises in employment, public health, education, and racial and ethnic disparities that have become increasingly visible have put many of our beliefs and professional practices into question. This is especially true for those who work in the international education sector, who have been affected not only by the closure of university campuses, but also by the restrictions on international mobility and those resulting from border closures.

In the next sections, we discuss some of the lessons learned from the implementation of a program that explores Blackness in Colombia. This program connects students enrolled in U.S. universities, generally from underserved and underrepresented groups<sup>1</sup>, with Afro-Colombians living in the department of Valle del Cauca (in the southwest of Colombia, where a significant proportion of Afro-Colombians live) and the Caribbean coast of Colombia.

This chapter presents a critically oriented state of affairs about some of the limitations of both study abroad programs and the global industry of international education. The aim is to not only contextualize the necessity of having programs with a racial and identity emphasis, such as the one developed in Colombia, but also make visible the struggles and achievements in the implementation of our own project. Then, we describe the central aspects of the current CET program in Colombia.

We continue with a discussion in which we argue that rather than being an entirely decolonial initiative; this program promotes cross-cultural dialogue, social justice, and a gradual transformation of specific colonialist views and power relations. We finish with potential contributions to strengthen the study abroad sector in general and initiatives that can be better implemented in the future.

### Thinking Critically about Programs that Reproduce Old Inequalities

Study abroad programs have been identified as effective means of furthering international and intercultural dialogue (Penbek, Şahin, & Güldem Cerit, 2012; Sobkowiak, 2019). They have accompanied the liberalization of markets and migratory flows, as well as the opening of borders between countries in the Global North and the Global South. Therefore, study abroad programs are a central component of the transnational mobility of people and ideas, with important participation from industries such as international education, tourism, social media, entertainment, the arts, and multilateral organizations, among others.

They are often promoted as windows to the unknown world through which enriching and transformative experiences are available for already

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<sup>1</sup>Although they refer to groups whose percentage of the population in a given sample is lower than their percentage of the national population, we extend this definition to nondominant groups who are insufficiently or inadequately represented. Therefore, in this chapter, underrepresented groups refer to historically discriminated and marginalized populations due to their sex, race, ethnicity, class, place of origin, special capacities, sexual orientation, and gender identity (Allen, 2017).

energetic youth who not only have the financial and academic resources to be part of these programs, but also want to take over the world. Language advertising for “global citizenship” is used to allure students who aspire to increase their cultural competence. Images of paradisiacal campuses reminiscent of dazzling resorts in the Middle East and of pristine beaches in Southeast Asia work as visual frames in which dozens of students of different nationalities smile and gather, ready to engage in stimulating learning experiences.

However, on the ground, reality tells a substantially different story. For decades, there has been an overrepresentation of White students from a relatively similar group of universities in the Global North that travel to the Global South (top universities, 2014). In Latin America, for example, Costa Rica and Argentina rank as two of the top ten destinations for international education programs (US News, 2020). Stereotypically, advertisements sell these countries as having beautiful and lush landscapes where people are friendly and have alluring accents.

As a result, visitors might feel safer here than in other Latin American countries with higher rates of criminality (top universities, 2016; culture trip, 2017). In addition, according to Zemach-Bersin (2007) and the Lincoln Commission (2006), while in the United States Black-non-Hispanic and Hispanic students make up 25% of the student population enrolled in higher education institutions, less than 8.5% of those who study abroad are Black-non-Hispanic and Hispanic. In the same vein, White students, who make up 52% of the population in higher education (Census, 2018), represent between 75% and 83% of students who study abroad (Havergal, 2016; IIE, 2017).

Despite institutional and industry efforts, study abroad programs continue to replicate many of the disparities that exist not only within U.S. or Colombian societies, but also between developed and developing countries. These programs are not only rooted in the discourses of efficiency, performance, and productivity but also operate under the same grading scales and privileges of access found in academia (Wood, 2007). Furthermore, experiences of studying abroad can be entrapped within and reinforce exotic, prejudiced, stereotyped, and essentialist visions of the host societies, while those who travel abroad might end up replicating, though subconsciously, corporate and state discourses that have been internalized in their own countries.

Behind institutional narratives that promote academic exchange there are powerful structures that determine who does and does not travel, to where, and under what circumstances. While there is no reliable information about the proportion of LGBTQIA+ students that participate in overseas education from both the U.S. and Colombia, McIntyre (2018) argues that, for the particular case of transgender students, being part of a study abroad

program has a positive effect. However, these exchange processes can come with a risk to their mental health due to both their experiencing high levels of discrimination and the inability that institutions, especially the providers of study abroad services, have to accommodate their unique needs.

Study abroad programs in the United States have been both a vehicle and a desired outcome of social justice in terms of racial disparities, particularly affecting Black and African descendant groups (Bell, 2007; Jewell, 2002). This has been visible and pressing for historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) that, by definition, have been created with the purpose of educating people of African descent and providing access to all the opportunities and benefits of U.S. society to the marginalized. Thus, some HBCUs have initiated study abroad programs with an emphasis on race and identity to promote conversations and changes that positively impact the lives of Black communities in both the host and home countries. This includes the selection of students of African descent enrolled in American universities but from different nationalities, the hiring of instructors of African descent in the host country, and the creation of spaces and activities for communication and exchange with groups of interest, including Black communities in the host country (Hope-Navas, 2020).

In this context, studies may show that one of the contributing factors to the low representation of Black and indigenous applicants and other applicants of color (Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander) in study abroad programs is related to the program curriculum that excludes them (Brux & Fry, 2009; Hope-Navas, 2020). Students of color, particularly African Americans, have reported that they are more inclined to participate in programs that accept their Blackness and encourage them to examine aspects of their identities.

Programs that allow for the exploration of one's own identity and heritage tend to have larger numbers of African American students (Neff, 2001). Study abroad providers have begun to create programs that center on topics relevant to the interests of students of color in order to increase participation. The study abroad program in Colombia that we discuss in the next sections is a product of this situation, and it demonstrates advancement in the Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad (The Forum on Education Abroad, 2020), especially those focusing on inclusion and overcoming barriers for historically marginalized groups<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Published by The Forum on Education Abroad, the *Standards of Good Practice* were created to guide ethical decision-making and support organizations as they provide education abroad experiences aligned with the highest ethical standards. Clause 6.1.3 of the *Standards* states that "responsible parties shall endeavor to recruit and advise students from all segments of the

## Background to Study Abroad Programs with Afro-Descendant Emphasis in Colombia

In Colombia, international education programs have experienced significant growth over the years. This is true for Colombian institutions that place students in foreign universities and for international applicants who seek Colombia as a destination for undergraduate and graduate studies. In 2012, 66,747 Colombian nationals studied abroad. In 2018, that number rose to 84,002.

Regarding the arrivals of international applicants, 14,193 students arrived in this country in 2016, while in 2018 that number exceeded 16,500 students (El Tiempo, 2019). Even with this incremental margin, UNESCO observes that countries such as Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Ecuador are not competitive enough in attracting international students due to the increasingly large and deficient ratio between the population leaving these countries and the ones that enter for academic reasons (UNESCO, 2019).

Although the situation in Colombia has improved in recent years, security challenges and the particularities of being a country with a longstanding armed conflict, among other conditions, have limited the scope of overseas education in this country. The implementation of a study abroad program in which the voices of Afro-Colombians have been emphasized and the main audiences have been Black students and other students of color enrolled in U.S. universities responds, in some way, to this history of conflict and exclusion. In different ways, systemic violence has resulted in and gone hand in hand with different forms of multidimensional precarity, including racialized educational gaps. When we examine the history of structural and direct violence that has been committed against Black students within the pre-K-12 schooling system and in higher education in the United States and Colombia, one can understand why a program that aims to center Blackness and tries to create a safe space for sustainable learning for students, particularly students of color, is crucial.

The need to empower Afro-descendant groups in regions where structural discrimination is visible has strengthened networks of transnational cooperation among historically marginalized groups. In the case of U.S. Colombia bilateral relations since the end of the 1990s and closely connected with the human rights advocacy of Afro-Colombians before the U.S. Congress and U.S. civil society, Afro-Colombian issues became very salient: the connections

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student population, including those who are historically underserved by their organization's programs."

between communities of African descent in both countries increased, a U.S. Colombia Action Plan on Racial and Ethnic Equality was agreed upon, and the human rights situation of Afro-Colombians and indigenous people entered as a contentious issue into the political deliberation of the U.S. foreign policy toward Colombia (Cortes, 2018). In this vein, the CET Colombia Program draws on ideas of international cooperation, diversity, and cultural exchange as ways to bridge racialized gaps in education.

This program is a comprehensive effort to increase educational mobility between the United States and Colombia. It was created as a bilateral agreement between Howard University (Washington, United States) and CET Academic Programs (Washington, United States) for the academic mobility of students toward Colombia. The Universidad del Valle in Cali (Colombia) would act as the host university.

As part of this agreement, CET Colombia has been in charge of creating curricular content focused on the African diaspora in Colombia and on-the-ground program operations. In 2018, the project expanded, and participation was opened not only to students from Howard University but also to students from other universities in the United States that showed an interest in this alliance.

Since the very beginning, the curriculum of this program has examined race, ethnicity, and identities through an Afro-Colombian lens and has attracted predominantly Black students and other students of color. They expressed that they chose this program not only because they wanted to improve their Spanish, but also because they were interested in the intersecting identities of Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean, connecting with other Black communities in the African Diaspora, and exploring race outside the United States. According to the program's predeparture student survey, when asked why they wanted to study abroad or participate in this program, 84% of students from the Spring 2019, Fall 2019, and Spring 2020 semesters said that they were interested in the content of the program, while 28% expressed a desire to improve their Spanish language skills.

### The Institutional Experience

"Centering Afro-Colombian Narratives" has become a guiding principle within the CET program in Colombia, providing a meaningful academic and existential experience to students, staff, and instructors. It also reflects a consensus about the need to challenge epistemological and political positions that have historically neglected the knowledge of marginalized communities in mainstream academia. Given the persistence of structural racism that

affects Afro-descendant groups in Colombia and the United States, the faculty and staff at CET believe that the role of academia (including the study abroad sector) should be transformed. Therefore, in implementing this program, the faculty and staff have advanced in the following:

- **Developing innovative learning strategies**

The decision to bring Afro-Colombian narratives to the forefront requires more than selecting Black professors with academic credentials. It necessitates dedication and prior work in order to connect their knowledge of and from Afro-Colombian communities with their pedagogical practices. The program's faculty does not just have a background as researchers or activists with Afro-Colombian or Campesinx-Mestizx communities; they are involved in efforts to overcome the traditional separation between the production and use of knowledge.

They believe that ideas about historically marginalized communities should be discussed, interpreted, and socialized with them, and that the communities themselves should participate as active diffusers of such knowledge. This is not an easy path, as previous generations of scholars and activists from the Global South have revealed (Fals Borda, 1987). The faculty continuously grapple with balancing traditional teaching practices with the urgency to adopt strategies that propose and negotiate more nuanced and balanced positions with the communities they work with. They are driven by the idea that their practices are part of a collective political effort that can contribute to transforming the structures of racial injustice.

The faculty has been dedicated to raising discussions centered around the vulnerability and agency of historically marginalized groups. Through diverse learning strategies, students have been exposed to the transnational, historical, and socio-political context that defines this message in the Colombian context. The faculty has tried to accomplish this through various means, including the creation of multilingual courses and content and the use of various teaching strategies with an emphasis on English and Spanish.

The above has been achieved by using academic, media, and transatlantic archive content that highlights stories of different diasporic experiences, and is not only focused on people of African descent. Additionally, there has been the combination of virtual and in-person learning environments, enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, one of the most important aspects of the program has been its ability to combine academic knowledge with community education, given the close connections that most of



the professors have with grassroots organizations (see, for example, CONPA, 2020; Márquez, 2018).

This means that part of the information discussed and presented in the courses is the result of a joint effort between the faculty and the social organizations and communities with which the program works to advance in the following areas: race, ethnicity, and identity in the Pacific and the Caribbean Coast; transitional justice in Colombia; policies of representation and mobilization of Afro-Colombian communities; as well as the territorialities and environmental landscapes of historically marginalized groups.

Likewise, professors from both the program and the Universidad del Valle have created spaces to discuss with the students their publications and materials. Afro-Colombian literature and its analysis, reports from NGOs and national and multilateral organizations such as the National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES, 2009; AFRODES & Global Rights, 2006, 2007, 2008), official reports from academic and transitional justice organizations such as the Comprehensive System of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition, pedagogical material created exclusively for the courses, book chapters, books, and articles written by the faculty and published in academic peer-reviewed academic journals and presses in Colombia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, among others, are all explored in the classroom.

- **Designing syllabi that emphasize the history of Afro-Colombians and other marginalized groups.**

The program creates syllabuses that (i) reflect the problems of Afro-Colombian communities, (ii) use sources developed by them, and (iii) ponder aspects of diversity and inclusion such as gender identity and sexual orientation. Furthermore, due to the complexities of racial mixing in Colombia, some courses incorporate elements from other ethnic and racial groups, such as indigenous and Campesino-Mestizxs. Inclusion is a critical component of this program and this is reflected in the composition of the faculty.

As a counterexample to the traditional educational system, especially in colleges and universities in Colombia, this program is made up of a significant number of Afro-Colombian professors and staff. It also includes mestizo and White faculty as well as instructors of Campesinx-Mestizx origin, which makes this a good case of collaboration among different ethnic and racial groups.

Promoting a more equitable work environment means that the program's leadership has recruited instructors of different ethnicities, identities, and sexual orientations. This is an important milestone to reduce racialized and gendered educational gaps in Colombia, considering the structural obstacles and everyday forms of discrimination that these marginalized groups have historically faced. However, this does not mean that the work is finished.

Although there is a relatively equitable distribution of faculty who identify themselves as men and women, the program has not recruited professors who identify themselves as trans or queer Afro-Colombian and Indigenous instructors, among others. Likewise, the program has not yet enrolled trans students. These situations might help program administrators, staff, and faculty realize the structural discriminatory treatment that trans scholars and students have faced in history and help to overcome this sort of invisibilization.

Along with having professors who are advocates and members of the community, our staff is a good example of what this program does, which is bridge the communication gap and build alliances between Black Colombians and Black Americans. The staff is composed of a resident director, a director of operations, and a roommate coordinator. As a Black American woman, the Resident Director uses what she learns from living in Colombia as a foreigner to better support visiting students as they navigate aspects of their identity and learn new cultural norms and traditions.

The Director of Operations is a Black Colombian woman who lives the realities of being Afro-Colombian and is well connected to the community and grassroots organizations that we have partnered with in the program. In turn, the roommate coordinator, as a Black Colombian queer male, has also been a support system for students of intersectional identities. Having a team that shares some of the same experiences and identities as students has been critical in promoting sustainable learning spaces for them abroad.

In relation to the syllabi, in terms of their contents and strategies, they embody a comprehensive perspective of the most critical aspects that Afro-Colombians and other groups continue facing in their struggles to be recognized and to eradicate discrimination and social exclusion. In the case of ethnic and Campesinx-Mestizx communities, over the past three decades, they have not only continued to live the reality of discrimination and exclusion, but the Colombian internal armed conflict has entailed rampant and systematic human rights violations that threaten their chances to survive physically and culturally.

Bringing Afro-Colombian (and, to a lesser extent, Campesinx-Mestizx) narratives into the core of the program demands addressing their realities.

Additionally, the syllabuses highlight the struggles and forms of resistance of the communities and not just their condition as victims of violence and exclusion. The syllabus comprises, among others: the historical process that has led to the legal recognition of Afro-Colombians, the complexities of identity formation, the impacts and destruction of their (and campesinx-mestizx) communities through forced displacement, dispossession, and land abandonment, environmental conflicts associated with both corporate land grabbing and illicit economies, the contributions and obstacles Afro-Colombians face in the traditional and transitional justice systems, the aggravated discrimination suffered by women and LGBTQIA+ groups, as well as the forms of resistance of different communities, not only Afro-Colombians.

- **Recognizing personal reflections and positionalities around the students' identity processes**

### The Colombian Roommates

The program pairs visiting students in apartments with Colombian students who are considered their roommates for the semester to promote relationship building based on age and shared university experience. One of the main interests of this program is the development of personal and interpersonal relationships between the students from the United States and Colombia. The program has created spaces in which visiting students learn about Afro-Colombian history and culture from young Afro-Colombian students enrolled at Universidad del Valle. In this vein, the Colombian students act as cultural facilitators and allow the visiting students to have a better understanding of daily life and cultural meanings found in Colombia, particularly in Cali.

The Colombian students selected to participate in this program are also active in student organizations (mostly Black student organizations) on campus. They are interested in making intercultural connections and are both passionate and knowledgeable on the topics of race and identity. Not only do the visiting students reflect on topics related to race and identity during class, but they also learn about the culture firsthand as they build meaningful relationships with students from the Afro-Colombian community.

These arrangements allow for key cross-cultural conversations and foster an environment of exchange in which students from the United States and Colombia share opinions on different subjects, creating a platform to improve communication and second-language skills for both groups.

Following the *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad*, clause 4.4.6, “Each organization should design its programs to provide opportunities for students to interact with broadly diverse peers, personnel, and members of local communities,” this cultural exchange also opens doors for students of different ethnic backgrounds to build solidarity based on the similar experiences of people pertaining to the African diaspora.

Despite the positive outcomes of this intercultural exchange, there is room for improvement. Most of the Afro-Colombian students that participated in the program came from Eastern Cali, where some of the poorest and most marginalized communes of the city are located. In this type of accommodation, visiting students receive money from home based on a U.S. currency, while their Colombian counterparts keep their (low) income in Colombian pesos. In this type of economic imbalance, visiting students could reproduce bubble spaces and relationships in which they occupy a privileged position in relation to Afro-Colombians enrolled in public universities. For many of them, pursuing an education at the Universidad del Valle represents their only opportunity to visit another region other than their place of origin and leave behind a precarious lifestyle.

Thus, this social exchange might reveal preexistent inequalities that reinforce structural gaps between residents of the Global North and the Global South. However, reflecting on this issue might also help faculty and staff balance some of these pre-existing gaps, for example in terms of second language skills for Afro-Colombian students, who generally have not received enough bilingual or multilingual training.

- **Unpacking student identities and its impact on their study abroad process**

According to Brux and Fry (2010), racism and discrimination are a concern for families of students of color desiring to study abroad. Furthermore, reports of Black students returning home from studying abroad indicate that they felt isolated in dealing with issues related to being a racial minority in the host country. One could imagine how students of color may feel isolated while navigating these experiences, especially if they are in predominantly White cohorts with White counterparts and onsite staff who have limited understanding of these lived processes.

Working in a program that has enrolled predominantly Black and other students of color has opened our eyes to some of the unique challenges that they face while studying abroad. At the same time, we have witnessed meaningful ways in which students support each other during these

difficult times. CET faculty and staff have become increasingly aware of the importance of creating moments of reflection and safe spaces for students to connect and share their experiences as they were living them in the present moment, following the *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad*, clause 6.2.6: “Responsible parties shall support students as they navigate identities including race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, ability, and socioeconomic status in the local context.” In these spaces, students interrogate aspects of their identity, unpack daily microaggressions, and draw from concepts that they learned in class as they gain a deeper understanding of racial identity in the Colombian context and ultimately themselves.

One of the themes that constantly surfaces is self-identification versus perceived identity. C.G.<sup>3</sup>, a participant and past participant, was born in the United States to Afro-Colombian and Afro-Honduran parents. She opened up about her struggle with the complexities of her identity, particularly when it came to the color of her skin.

Due to Latin America’s long history of racial mixing that has been influenced by mestizaje ideologies and the desire to erase Blackness, the ethnic and racial classification in Colombian society emphasizes distinctions of skin color on a continuum. Research shows that skin color is the basis of social stratification in many Latin American countries, although society often denies it (Telles, 2014). The student shared with onsite staff that, in the United States, she proudly identified as a Black Colombian. However, in Colombia, her family (and many others) constantly told her that she was not Black (*Negra*), but *Morena*, *Trigueña* o *Cafecita*.

These were all words to describe her fair skin color but not her racial identity. It was frustrating for her because others did not view her in the same way she viewed herself in Colombia. Similarly, the student’s encounters in the United States revealed that there was limited understanding of Blackness in a Latino-American context.

Despite the frustrations, she stated that these experiences taught her to be confident in her identities and not to place them in the hands of others. These findings confirm aspects of cross-cultural adaptability, emotional resilience, and negotiation of or exposure to multiple identities as central elements for Latin students who undertake education programs abroad (Hannigan, 2008; Lima, 2011). According to Lima, Latinx students in

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<sup>3</sup>Throughout the document, the initials of the respondents have been altered to preserve their anonymity.

international education programs confront pre-established knowledge that allows them to explore the various meanings of their ethnic and cultural identities.

Thus, during their process abroad, they might experience positive changes when they enter other learning communities, are able to understand other facets or perceptions of identity, and make part of diversified efforts (socially and ethnically speaking) to increase the population that studies abroad.

M.J., another student, went through a similar journey of belonging. She was born to a French father and an Afro-Cuban mother. Through her experience, she learned to embrace her Black identity while recognizing the privileges of being multiracial. After returning home from the program, she wrote:

“This trip [semester abroad] was very eye-opening in terms of race, identities and ethnicity. I definitely learned to be more conscious of the space I take up in different places and how I may be perceived, and that by being biracial, I am going to have to get used to no matter where I go, my perceived race by others is fluid, but as long as I am confident in my skin and identity then it doesn't matter if other people don't agree.”

This journey of belonging involved her choosing to change her appearance to align with Colombia's perception of Blackness. Although she had not questioned her Blackness before coming to Colombia, due to the differences in the fluidity of the racial categories, she desired to be less racially ambiguous. Although she made these changes, ultimately, she began to accept the complexity of her multiple identities.

Another important aspect of identity discussed in the program is privilege. Many of the students who participate in the program dedicate time to examining inequality worldwide and approach it considering their own positionality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class. And while they do not have access to certain resources that have been afforded to those who have not been a part of historically marginalized groups, being in Colombia has led them to focus on individual aspects of their privileged identities.

For example, N.P., who identified as a Black queer woman, shared how she developed a deeper awareness of the privilege she experienced based on her nationality. Given the history of violence and systemic racism (anti-Black racism in particular) she had faced in the United States, she was not patriotic and did not consider being from the United States as central to her

identity. However, in Colombia, her nationality was an identity marker for others.

Although she shared the same racial identity with Afro-Colombians and could empathize with some of their experiences, she was still from the Global North. She also desires to live in another country after college graduation, largely so she can escape the mental trauma that has come from being Black in the United States. However, she also described feeling a responsibility to work against social injustice in the United States, and she recognized the privilege she had in being able to cross borders with ease as an American citizen.

These reflections also involve White students gaining a deeper knowledge and understanding of privilege. F.T., a White participant, said that throughout the program, she became more aware of how she occupies spaces and her responsibility in addressing racism in the United States and globally. Most White students who participate in study abroad programs leave their home country, where they are part of the dominant group, and enter the host countries as part of a majority White cohort. This is not the case for the CET Colombia program which has had a 21% participation rate of White students over three semesters.

These various stories shared by student participants demonstrate how their multifaceted identities influenced their study abroad process, resulting in students gaining a deeper understanding of themselves in relation to land, communities, and language.

- **Attempts to establish more horizontal relationships with visited communities**

The relationships established between students and communities not only foster intercultural and intergenerational bonds but should also be seen as ways of recognizing and interpreting important aspects of community life and as enriching processes that take place outside the classroom. Thus, the program has opened up different curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities. The program facilitates field trips to different parts of Colombia, including Cali, the departments of Cauca and Valle (southwestern Colombia—the Pacific), as well as the Caribbean Coast, particularly San Basilio de Palenque, known to be one of the first free African and African-descent towns in the Americas, and Cartagena de Indias.

As an educational experience about the contributions of Afro-Colombian communities to the world, the program has a week-long seminar in Cartagena

and San Basilio de Palenque, a town that was declared a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005. Palenque is a maroon community, mostly inhabited by direct descendants of enslaved Africans, and a territory that has preserved its own Spanish-based creole language: Palenquero. In spite of this historical and political importance for both Afro-Colombians and the country, this community continues to face exclusion, vulnerability, and precarities, as is the case with other Afro-Colombian communities.

For three days each semester, students and staff travel to this emblematic town to learn about its history and some of their most significant traditions. It is a week of immersion in a highly representative territory to learn firsthand about the traditions of a people who have served as a symbol of hope and struggle for freedom. Their resistance aimed at preserving their African ancestry highlights the protection of a language, ancestral forms of social control, organization, and justice, as well as cultural expressions such as food, traditional medicine, music, dance, and literature.

After spending three days in Palenque, students travel to Cartagena to visit peripheral neighborhoods, La Boquilla and Nelson Mandela, to see firsthand the effects that tourism has had on Afro-Colombian communities. Thus, they engage in critical dialogues with Black activists and community leaders about forced displacement and resettlement in an urban context.

In addition to the week-long seminar, the program has designed an intense schedule with shorter trips to Buenaventura, northern Cauca, Los Farallones National Park, and district and state courts to see the everyday dynamics of Afro-Colombian and Campesinx-Mestizx communities. These trips allow the students to gain first-hand knowledge of the social realities of groups protected by Law 70 of 1993, also known as the Law of Black Communities, such as *parteras* (Colombia's traditional midwives), *paneleros* (small-holding cane growers), and leaders working in Community Councils. These trips also show some of the most important conflicts these communities have experienced when defending their traditions, territories, and dignity.

The racial profiling in the United States and Colombia, the unequal distribution of legal burdens that show racial and social disparities in the access to and use of justice, as well as the environmental conflicts associated with both the non-recognition of ancestral and life practices and the dynamics of the illicit economies in Colombia, are aspects in which students engage in meaningful conversations with the communities. Thus, focused field trips allow, to some extent, for more horizontal dialogue and bonding.



They are innovative, pedagogical, and complementary to the work we do in the classroom and are a window to the world that allows us to recognize the diversity and complexity of Afro-Colombian communities. However, there are aspects that should be reexamined and improved. Field trips, as subjects of decolonization, have been criticized for their environmental cost, superficial engagement, and an extractive marketization of ancestral practices on behalf of education, among other factors. This reveals representations of exoticism and inferiority. Also, the idea of students as “clients” reinforces a subject-object separation between students and the host society.

These criticisms are organic to any program and have certainly taken place in ours. Field trips create a “zoo visit” atmosphere, in which students take pictures exoticizing people in the community without genuine interaction. Programs have also been criticized for both deepening the touristic perceptions of students who want to know “the real” culture of a particular region and reinforcing students’ positions as consumers.

Some often feel a sense of entitlement because they paid to be a part of the program. To meet their demands, staff create activities to satisfy them, making them the central focus.

However, CET faculty and staff have developed different strategies to overcome this. The program is making every effort to buy local, pay fair wages, practice environmental sustainability, and center pedagogical practices rooted in discussion that allow students to reflect—before and after each field activity—in the context of the communities they visit. The regions are selected due to their representativeness and historical impact, especially in relation to the consolidation of collective actors from marginalized communities.

In this vein, such regions tell a history of emancipation, and while visiting them, faculty, staff, and students inquire about local needs and try to make donations in kind (i.e., stretchers, first aid kits, etc.) in an effort to do away with the possibility of establishing purely commercial relationships. Thus, the program explores ways to make things better and minimize some of the contradictions that are implicit in these kinds of visits.

As part of this exchange, students engage in meaningful conversations with different actors. These dialogues comprise harsh realities and details about forms of resistance, in which students share with the communities their own personal and collective experiences in other countries. This has not been an easy task: most students are not prepared to face the scrutiny that community members may bring.

However, since the program started, the instructors in charge of accompanying the field trips have implemented practices that allow a more nuanced

dialogue. Based on these experiences, the program can push for less situational and more balanced conversations with the communities.

Likewise, another strategy known as “*conversatorios*,” which has been well evaluated by different members of academic and organizational circles, points that way. These *conversatorios* or talks in which a limited number of speakers (three to four) share their ideas about a specific topic, usually take place at the Universidad de Valle and require the participation of leaders from different social, community, and multilateral organizations. These efforts prioritize the role of a particular organization and promote more participatory pedagogies and horizontal dialogues between students, faculty, and community members. This is one example of many that expand the range of collaborative strategies and counteract the problems of superficial engagement found in study abroad programs.

### Aiming for a Cross-Cultural Study Abroad Program Focused on Transforming Power Relations

The program has not explicitly adopted any critical theory as a guiding principle. However, the emphasis on Afro-Colombian narratives, the course content focused on racism, exclusion, and violence faced by most Afro-Colombians and Campesinx-Mestizxs, as well as the selection of professors linked to grassroots communities, are all efforts to develop critical perspectives. In this vein, we argue the program itself has not advanced an entirely institutional decolonial agenda.

Instead, we have established critical dialogues to understand how study abroad programs are reproducers of colonial relationships (Sharpe, 2015) and how we create inflection points. We argue that rather than decolonizing, our practices have been motivated by a belief that power relations that maintain structures of discrimination and exclusion might be transformed (Ogden, 2008). The above could be understood as a first step on a long decolonial journey.

Following Tuck and Yang (2012) and Ogden (2008), we see our work as part of an effort to increase social justice while being cautious in describing all fights against colonial and unequal practices as decolonization. We believe that decolonization is neither a metaphor nor a fashionable trend, and although we are committed to overcoming old colonial ideas, there is a long way to go to make our program an entirely decolonized and decolonizing platform. Decolonization requires a radical mental, socio-cultural, and institutional transformation.

The study-abroad sector is embedded in structures and financial and technological capitals that reinforce colonialist tendencies and views, even within programs that openly discuss these matters (Sharpe, 2008). However, this does not mean we have not tried to overcome some of those colonialist tendencies. Instructors in the CET program continually echo the contributions of Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda, Frantz Fanon, the theology of liberation, and the participatory action research (IAP in Spanish) to advance their learning strategies.

Others employ critical methods and theories from disciplines such as law, sociology, gender studies, geography, and environmental science to encourage debates that are overlooked in other contexts. We see our work as neither a transformation in which colonial practices are totally removed nor an effort to break “the relentless structuring of the triad [White settlers, Indigenous groups, and Black and Brown peoples]—a break and not a compromise” (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We believe that comprehensive decolonized platforms require more than just swapping spots on the settler and colonial triad (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

As a result, the program responds to a historical process in which scholars in the Global South have transformed power relations that ignore diversity and equity for the majority of Black, indigenous, and people of color. It also challenges epistemologies and political economies that center Euro-Americanism (Fals Borda, 1987). Therefore, rather than decolonization, the program’s ethical and political horizon is centered around social justice and the recognition of human dignity and diversity. To the extent that these elements overlap with decolonial aspirations, the program strives to align with decolonial tenets without this actually being at the core of its foundation.

Likewise, on this journey, we have all faced consumerist pressures to make activities attractive and appealing (academically and socially) for the students. This, added to the hyper-protection of the student body to keep it safe from the “dangers” of cities such as Cali (and countries such as Colombia), makes the horizon of international education programs with critical aspirations like ours more complex.

But even within those constraints, we have promoted not only enriching experiences with social leaders and victims of the armed conflict but also dialogues in which students, faculty, and staff reflect on how pre-established knowledge persists and who the “enlightened and authorized” voices to speak on behalf of the communities have been. In this program, peer-reviewed jargon is not the ultimate truth, and scientific knowledge does not necessarily

represent a superior epistemology. Our efforts would be ambiguous and insufficient if we restricted our sources to academic publications.

Therefore, the program has encouraged the creation and spreading of knowledge from the communities, and it has approached it in line with Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) contributions on the systematicity of colonial pretensions such as "discovery" and "claims" in the apprehension and creation of scientific knowledge in field research. We also garner, and we believe others, too, should garner, knowledge from Afro-Colombian and Campesinx-Mestizx communities about constructs that in fact have been more effective in preserving life.

As for the field visits, they deal with realities that study abroad programs usually overlook. While some of them could be perceived as mostly touristic, the majority have been designed to reflect critical conditions related to both our internal conflict and deep expressions of inequality in the South. Thus, the tug of war between violence and exclusion against marginalized communities on one side and the capacity of Afro-Colombian, indigenous, Campesinx-Mestizx, and LGBTQIA groups to resist and defend their livelihoods on the other is relatively novel in study abroad programs.

Finally, one of the goals of confronting colonialist views in education is to embrace social justice and expand the possibilities for historically discriminated groups. They represent the "otherness" that regimes and armed groups of all ideologies have tried to "normalize" and overlook. In Colombia, for example, armed actors have threatened, displaced, and killed ethnic groups and social minorities, claiming that they are an obstacle to development.

Our program focuses on some of them, especially Afro-Colombian and Campesinx-Mestizx communities, although instructors are interested in expanding these debates and conversations to include indigenous and LGBTQIA+ groups. Also, students have noted the importance of Black feminism in Latin America and the Caribbean as part of the curriculum and have requested more information on the topic. This can be understood as part of the global initiatives to address a lack of knowledge on this topic, especially in overseas education. It is an important first step.

We have also tried to ensure that students' ability to express and define their personal identities is present in both class discussions and other opportunities for dialogue. These efforts are still insufficient to assert that our program has consolidated both a stronger decolonial orientation and practices that offer an optimal environment for recognizing and transforming the negative impacts of the intersectionality of diverse sources of discrimination. For example, the pandemic and the current racial and economic crises

have highlighted the need to adjust the traditional course requirements and consider how these traumatic events have impacted students' academic performance. The knowledge acquired in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic has made us realize that we still need to strengthen our collective efforts to educate ourselves even more.

## Conclusion

The extended restrictions on international mobility and public health concerns, such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, could transform education abroad in the future. In line with these challenges, international education is increasingly connected to local realities, although not necessarily to the situation of historically under-represented and marginalized communities. Various authors and institutions around the world promote decolonial practices or, at least, confront colonial views and tendencies that are problematic for them and the students and that consciously or unconsciously disregard existing realities in the host societies.

The program in Colombia follows principles of social justice, transnational dialogue, and intercultural cooperation among historically marginalized groups. In this perspective, our initiatives gravitate toward the recognition of Afro-Colombian narratives and have received the attention mainly of Black and Latinx college students enrolled in U.S. universities. Social justice is not limited to just talking about Afro-Colombian experiences as an isolated topic.

It also refers to the creation of programs and course content that cover highly sensitive topics such as the Colombian armed conflict and the vulnerability of different historically discriminated groups in the midst of unequal social structures and varied forms of direct, structural, and environmental violence.

Promoting the hiring of a diverse faculty with different ethnicities, identities, and sexual orientations has been a cornerstone of the program. In Colombia, it is not common to see staff and faculty made up mostly of Afro-Colombians, especially in metropolitan areas outside the Pacific Coast. The hiring of Afro-Colombian women, some of whom come from relatively distant towns on the Pacific Coast, the equal distribution of men and women as instructors (five women and three men plus two women who are directors), as well as the presence of instructors who recognize themselves as having different sexual orientations and gender identities, show how the program has advanced in terms of inclusion and diversity.

This has been extended to the enrollment of students from historically marginalized U.S. college populations, which include genderqueer and non-binary applicants. However, the above has also made visible other problems of representation to the extent that we have not recruited and enrolled as many trans and Indigenous students and instructors as we wish. Therefore, we have a long way to go to increase diversity and broaden the social justice guidelines of this program.

Centering Afro-Colombian narratives is an institutional effort to highlight voices that, although they have witnessed armed violence and systemic exclusion in their territories, have also created a powerful capacity for transnational alliances. This makes Afro-Colombian groups and Campesinx-Mestizx communities relevant actors in discussions about resistance, contestation, vindictive art, and collective action. The program goal is to provide students with an intellectual and experiential foundation to understand the dynamics of race, ethnicity, and identity in Colombia. In the process, we connect audiences, especially from under-represented groups enrolled in U.S. universities, with Afro-Colombian and other marginalized communities in Colombia, with whom they can expand their academic and life perspectives.

Finally, the work of CET Colombia can be seen as a modest step in a long journey of social awareness and change, but we are committed to continuing this process and increasing the visibility of both students and groups that have navigated these waters. The program has been transformative in many ways, including the presence of a diverse faculty and staff, more horizontal dialogues between underrepresented U.S. college groups and marginalized communities in Colombia, syllabi covering critical theories and postcolonial and decolonial contributions in racial and ethnic studies, law, environmental sciences, sociology, anthropology, and literature, as well as the possibility of advancing cross-cultural and intergenerational conversations with students from low-income families and territories. This could lead the program toward a turning point where social justice, emancipatory studies, and decolonial practices are its guiding principles, while also illuminating other endeavors in the Global South that face similar challenges.

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