

Avoiding Deficit Thinking: Facilitating Global Learning Through Faculty Professional Development

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Internationalization and Global Learning; Professional Training; University/Higher Education

Setting

The setting for this case is a mid-sized public university in Southwestern Ohio. The university received federal funding for a faculty development program that focuses on integrating global perspectives in the general curriculum. A key component of the program is an opportunity for faculty to participate in an immersive program in India. India provides a rich context to learn about diverse worldviews, practices and lifestyle preferences through its diverse subcultures formed by intersecting influences of language, religion, region, gender, and socio-economic class, among others, making it highly relevant for courses in humanities and social sciences.

In particular, the faculty development program focuses on recognizing colonial roots of higher education with the aim of faculty participants incorporating decolonial approaches in their teaching and curricula as a result of their participation. The program includes a preparatory phase, travel abroad to India, followed by the faculty members revising their courses.

The faculty members participating in the program represent a variety of disciplines ranging from social sciences to humanities and bring a wealth of interdisciplinary knowledge and expertise about history, politics,

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economics, media, and communication. Some faculty members have specific disciplinary expertise about India, teach courses that include content related to India, and a few have travelled to India before. Participating faculty also represent diverse social identities based on age, gender, race and ethnicity, nationality, and other dimensions.

Case

During the preparatory phase, participating faculty engaged in reading scholarly articles from a variety of disciplines and discussed them, while also sharing discipline-specific resources that focused on current events, issues, and perspectives within India. During these exchanges, one resource shared was a webinar on a book titled “India is Broken¹.” The intention was simply to share a resource. However, the impact may vary depending on the individuals’ social identities and the extent of familiarity with India. This led to a thoughtful discussion about the power of language, and that without context, a statement such as this could promote negative stereotyping and deficit-based views of a country and a group of people. For example, an individual of Indian origin may feel frustrated, sad, or disheartened. In contrast, an individual who has limited familiarity with India may form an initial impression about the country as broken that may serve as a lens through which they process any further information about India and/or its people.

One group member highlighted the human tendency to accept such one-size-fits-all descriptions that could be true of any group of individuals as valid². For example, one could put any country name (e.g., “USA is broken” or “UK is broken”) because it is possible to think of ways in which each country can be conceived as “broken.” However, as another group member indicated, terms like broken are particularly problematic for Global South countries (those located in Africa, Asia, and Latin America) because historically these countries have been viewed as “less developed” relative to the Global North (Australia, North America, Europe), and thus, the notion that these countries are broken tends to be more accessible in individuals’ memory.

Looking more closely, a statement such as USA is broken may carry less weight because of the global view of USA as the world’s superpower and a highly advanced country. As the Nigerian Novelist Chimamanda Adichie mentions in her Ted Talk, the *Danger of a Single Story*, “because of America’s cultural and economic power,” people have multiple stories about the USA. In contrast, not only is there substantially less diversity in the stories we consume about Global South countries from the media, literature, and scholarly discourses, these stories focus on problems and deficits. A third group member added that for some individuals who have traveled to Global South countries, their experience in the country becomes the single story about the country. For example, if their experiences are primarily with women at domestic violence shelter for a project, the single story formed may be “Indian women are victims of restrictive gender roles.” Such a single story does not allow for the diversity of stories of the many women educators, women entrepreneurs, women scientists, women writers, and women in the business and non-profit sectors. In the same way, describing a Global South country as broken ignores all of that country’s strengths.

¹ Written by an Indian economic historian, this book traces India’s economy from independence to today. See Mody, A. (2023). *India Is Broken: A people betrayed, Independence to Today*. Stanford University Press.

² Social psychologists refer to these one-size-fit-all descriptions as Barnum statements, and the human tendency to accept them as valid as the Barnum effect. See Dickson, D. H. & Keyy, I. H. (1985). The ‘Barnum Effect’ in Personality Assessment: A Review of the Literature. *Psychological Reports*, 57 (2), 367-382.

The group also engaged in a conversation about how to discuss content related to India in the classroom, in particular how we might frame and contextualize resources such as “India is Broken” for students who have varying levels of familiarity with India. Also considered was the importance of highlighting the distinction between state and people (e.g., a critique of a country’s government is not a critique of its people). In addition, there was a discussion about how to sensitively engage in conversations with colleagues in India who may not share our group members’ individual perspectives about India’s economy, political system, or social issues. Woven throughout these conversations was an ongoing reflection of how our social identities based on age, gender, race and ethnicity, nationality, along with disciplinary expertise and rank contribute to the way in which others receive and experience what we say.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are some ways in which faculty teaching at North American universities can talk about challenges in Global South countries without promoting deficit views and “single” stories?
- How might we ensure that our students have multiple stories, including stories of assets and strengths about Global South countries?
- How might faculty members be reflective about their own social identities and how they contribute to their interactions with students and colleagues?
- In the classroom, how might faculty members be sensitive to students of different backgrounds (e.g., how students of Indian origin receive and experience content about India)?
- As a faculty member at a North American university, what do you do when your perspectives about a country conflict with the perspectives of colleagues in that country?
- As a faculty member, how might we reconcile years of expertise and disciplinary knowledge with learning from the diverse experiences of those in other countries?