

Now What?

Facilitating Dialogue in Experiential Programs

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Tags

Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Experiential Education; Student Learning and Development; University/Higher Education

Setting

Outside the Lines Worldwide is a U.S.-based study abroad provider organization that offers semester programs for undergraduate students. The portfolio includes a set of thematic, experiential programs that are cohort-based (approximately 20-30 students per cohort from various U.S. sending universities) and led by a teaching team consisting of a professor of content and a facilitator. The facilitator supports students' affective learning and overall well-being in addition to guiding sessions with the group on community building, including the themes of power, privilege, and positionality. Much of the schedule is experientially focused—visiting NGOs and grassroots activist organizations, hearing from guest speakers engaged in the theme of the program, and living with host families; the structured class time and community building sessions act as spaces to synthesize the academic with lived experience. The teaching team works in coordination with a small in-country team who handles logistics and participates in academic and affective learning spaces, so as to contribute relevant local context and facilitate students' ability to process and make sense of their experiences.

The program described in the case below has a focus on public health and medical anthropology. The group is in Cape Town, South Africa, and spending three consecutive class days in a township to meet with grassroots activists, community leaders, and NGOs working to improve health outcomes there.

Case

On the first of the three-day visit, the community hosts welcome the students and staff warmly, and lead them in a song and dance before the guest lecturers and panelists speak to the group about the realities of living in a township, the burdens of disease, and how the community is working to address these issues. Right before lunchtime, a group of students notice that another student, Deidre, has posted a video of one of the small children, dressed in traditional garb and dancing, to her Instagram story. Some students are outraged at her “lack of respect” and can’t believe she would dare to post a photograph of a child to social media without the child’s or parents’ consent. Other students are of the opinion that the white student had, through the act of taking the photo, enacted a kind of violence on the black community that was so generously hosting them. Still other students do not find the Instagram post inappropriate and think the upset students are overreacting. After a full morning of panels, guest lectures, and dancing, the in-country coordination team puts out the bag lunches. The students race to grab food and sit down to eat, still heatedly discussing “the Instagram drama” in smaller groups. The community hosts, panelists, and guest lecturers are left nothing to eat.

At the end of the day, two students, Evan and Camille, approach Julian, the group’s facilitator, to express their disgust about the Instagram story. The students tell Julian that there are group dynamics at play that the staff do not see. Evan explains that there are students in the group who “put on their ‘woke’ clothes for class and say all the right things, but then at the end of the day they take it off and show who they really are,” acting in ways that are received as racist and classist. Evan and Camille ask to use one of Julian’s scheduled sessions to have a student-only meeting to address the Instagram situation and group dynamics, adding “No offense, Julian, we know you’re here to help, but we think the conversation will be more productive without any staff there.”

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How can Julian support Evan and Camille in the moment? What, if any, actions can Julian take with the rest of the group?
- If there is a student-only meeting, what, if any, follow up should be done with the students by Julian and/or other staff members? What tools can Julian give to the students to facilitate their student-only conversation(s)?
- What role can the in-country team play in addressing the various layers of the situation? How can Julian, the in-country team, and the professor work together to support the community hosts and students?
- The group will be going back to the township for two more days. How can the staff address the students on the greater issue of not sharing food with the community? What kind of amends/community building might be made with the hosts?
- How can Julian and the staff use the Experiential Learning Cycle¹ as a framework to structure a debriefing/processing session with the group? What other activities or discussions can Julian incorporate into his next community building session?

¹ Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.