

Bridge-Building in Study Abroad: Expectations, Language-Usage, and Support

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity and Social Justice; Student Services; University/Higher Education

Setting

The setting is a program in Spain under the study abroad office of a private, four-year, liberal arts college in the United States. This center has an office alongside six other U.S. university programs as part of a study abroad consortium within a public Spanish university. This consortium receives about 400 U.S. university students a year between undergraduate semester abroad or summer abroad students and post-graduate students. The semester in question, the college's cohort in Spain is made up of 19 students, of which five identify as Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color (BIPOC), and the consortium has about 160 students, 50 of whom identify as BIPOC.

The college's office in Spain is run by a resident director employed directly by the U.S. institution. While the students take classes in the Spanish university taught mostly in Spanish by the university's own faculty, these courses are designed exclusively for the consortium's students and are not open to the university's general student population. The resident directors for the U.S. universities that make up the consortium work alongside a dean appointed by the Spanish university to select courses and tenured or tenure-track faculty already in the university's employ to teach them. However, the resident director in this case study may also hire local adjunct professors to teach one class exclusively for his institution's students. The resident director is also responsible for advising, securing housing, and programming co-curricular activities. The resident director is from the U.S.

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Case

Maritza and Anabel identify as Black and Latina. They are spending the semester in their college's center in Spain. Like others in their cohort, they are taking advantage of the resources and support the center affords its students such as co-curricular programming centered on adjusting to the new culture and environment, spaces for students of color, and personalized guidance from the resident director, Justin.

One afternoon, Maritza and Anabel visit Justin's office to explain a distressing incident that occurred earlier in the day in their anthropology class. A White student read a case study passage aloud which contained the N-word, and there was no intervention or comment by the professor or any other student, nor was there a trigger warning prior to the reading or in the class syllabus. As the only Black students in the class, they felt uncomfortable speaking up at the time. Justin asks the students how they felt about reaching out to the professor to let him know what had happened and how it made them feel. Maritza says that she has no problem reaching out by email and will do so right away.

The following afternoon, Anabel and Maritza stop by Justin's office again. They explain to Justin that as the class was discussing the case study from the day before, which dealt with how historically excluded collectives reclaim the pejorative names used towards them by others, a non-BIPOC student in the class commented that an example of this is the use of the N-word by the African American community. This student also used the actual word in English, and the lesson continued.

Both Anabel and Maritza are incredulous as to how the N-word could be said in class on consecutive days. They don't understand how professors who teach students from the United States can be ignorant to the taboo nature of the N-word in English, despite the professors not being from the United States themselves. Justin listens to the students and asks what support the students need in the short term, while assuring them that he would be speaking with the Spanish university's dean and consortium faculty, as well as with their college's leadership to address the issue further.

Later the same day, Justin contacts his college's relevant support offices, namely, the study abroad office, the inclusion office, and the multicultural student services offices for advice on moving forward. He also requests an emergency meeting later in the afternoon with the dean and the other resident directors. During this meeting, the dean informs Justin that she would work on convening the consortium's faculty for an in-depth analysis and conversation of the social issues at play and that, in the meantime, the dean would contact them individually to explain what is occurring, to ask them to avoid using the N-word, and to direct them to send students with concerns to their own resident director's office.

The following week another student, Kim, visits Justin in his office. Kim, who identifies as Black, and her study group visited their Spanish teacher during office hours earlier in the day to review class material. Once the review was over, the professor brought up that he heard from the dean what happened in their other classes regarding the N-word, attempted to explain that this word has no real cultural equivalent in Spanish and proceeded to explain the word's etymology from Latin. During this explanation, the professor used the N-word, in English, multiple times, according to Kim. Kim describes how she became visibly distressed in the office and that the professor, sensing the negative impact of his explanation, began to apologize. This only caused Kim to feel singled out and even more uncomfortable in front of her study group. At this point, Justin's cohort has heard the N-word on three different occasions in the span of a week.

After speaking with his college's Senior Inclusion Officer, Justin learns that in the last two years the college community has experienced a series of higher-profile hate crimes on members of the Asian, Black, and Muslim communities as well as multiple lower-profile hate crimes and bias-related incidents. These have added to the distress caused by the use of the N-word at the Spanish university.

Justin, the Spanish university's dean, and the other resident directors convene a student and faculty assembly in one of the auditorium classrooms. Here, the dean offers a timeline of events. She subsequently opens the floor for students to ask questions and to express their thoughts and feelings. Some students insist that allies need to speak up when these sorts of incidents happen. Others, however, call for the dismissal of the professor who brought the word up in a Spanish-language study session. The dean states that no one will be fired, but because of recent events, initiatives were being enacted to complement DEI programing already in place, such as a diversity and inclusion task force with direct student involvement. Several of the students who voiced their concerns decide to sign up for the task force. Another initiative was training for local faculty and for Justin by his college's inclusion office to help contextualize the students' experience in the United States.

After the assembly with the students, faculty met separately with the dean and the resident directors to ask their own questions and express their own feelings and concerns. Having come out of a dictatorship only forty years earlier, several Spanish faculty struggle with the thought that there are what they consider to be "censored" words, especially when said words are used in an academic setting and not as an epithet directed towards anyone. There is anxiety regarding committing racial blunders, and other professors consider eliminating from their course bibliographies readings that may be viewed as controversial.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What did the local administration, including Justin and the dean, do effectively to support Anabel, Maritza, Kim, other students, and faculty? What could they have done better?
- What, if anything, could the following groups have done to help prevent this situation or to mitigate the distress once it occurred?
 - The Spanish university's faculty and administration
 - The consortium study abroad offices in Spain
 - The consortium study abroad offices in the U.S.
 - Other offices and leaders at the U.S. universities
- Most of the professors at the study abroad center are Spanish and teach a minority of their courses to U.S. American students. Considering this, how should Justin have responded to the students' comment that faculty should know not to say the N-word?
- How should the local administration have responded to some of the faculty members' concern that avoiding the N-word in an academic context was tantamount to censorship?
- If the Spanish faculty request a list of words not to say, how should the administration respond?
- How would this case be different if the study abroad program was located at a branch campus of a U.S. institution, or at a study abroad center run by a provider organization, rather than embedded in a local university?
- How should U.S.-based staff and their overseas colleagues work together to properly assist students in preparing for identity-based issues abroad? How should faculty and staff be prepared?