

“You Don’t Build Bridges to Safe and Familiar Territories”: Study Abroad Practice Based in Reconciliation as Falling Apart

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Part I

This three-part series of articles draws on critical engagement with the concept of reconciliation and its discontents as part of the author’s on-going work via the Employing Study Abroad for Peace and Reconciliation Project (under the Commonwealth Peace and Reconciliation Challenge Grant, Association of Commonwealth Universities). Transitional justice is laden with the same vocabulary of “addressing institutional gaps” by exporting “best practice” and ultimately “building capacity” that plagues parlance in international higher education. Since these terminologies uphold a hegemonic standard expected to be emulated by all, in both fields “catch-up” for some seems always aspirational, never realized. Transitional justice scholars and practitioners, like their counterparts in international higher education, are looking for ways to nourish their fields with plurality by making room for context. Both fields, in recent memory, have initiated the process of confronting entrenched interests and the monocultures of practice that eclipsed their worthy original goals. Anzaldúa’s (2002, p. 3) imagination of bridging as “the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without” is channelled to outline an alternative paradigm of international education grounded in justice. Part I of this series surveys critiques of experiments in reconciliation conducted around the world to find that they have left continuity of hegemonic worldviews and sociability unchallenged. The aim is to relate a new understanding of reconciliation with higher education internationalization practice, particularly study abroad, drawing on Anzaldúa’s (2002, p. 3) imagination of bridging as “the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without.”

Anzaldúa’s *Nepantla* is the dialogic space of in-betweenness between discord and harmony. At the epistemic level, in-betweenness (*Nepantla*)

reconstitutes borderlands as the refuge of the critical gaze. In lived experience, perhaps, it is a form of resistance to semiotic foreclosure, thereby being eminently transferable to self-assessment of learning through study abroad. Nepantla inspires the quest for that stranger which resides within us, thereby problematizing facile modalities of othering. My aim here is to explore why this could be a way to attempt reconciliation beyond simply discovering relative truths. I examine the implications of reframing study abroad and international education as building bridges to that which is unknown about ourselves and our contexts, through contact with diverse situations and scenarios, as a departure from the commonly encouraged purpose of knowing about “others.”

Reframing Reconciliation as In-betweenness

Transitional justice is concerned with rebuilding of institutions in the wake of violent conflict and other major disruptions. Reconciliation or restoring trust in social relations is an important component of this process. Since “anti-colonial struggle was written out of transitional justice from its very beginning” (Kurze & Lamont, 2021, p. 158), reconciliation has chiefly been attempted as a conservative enterprise in burying the hatchet. As a result, “transitional justice scholarship operates at a positivist level, or trying to explain certain, and desired, outcomes rather than destabilizing and unsettling unequal power relations” (Kurze & Lamont, 2021, p. 155). Yet, in its thick conception, reconciliation entails opening up to other ways of being. In this sense, it has the potential to bridge the anti-oppressive and decolonial perspectives, which Stein (2021) regards as two separate strands of critical discourse on higher education internationalization.

The epistemological agenda of the anti-oppressive strand is to ensure institutions of learning emphasize equality in all areas of learning. By implication, this strand’s ontological concern is with valorising and rewarding other ways of being (see Stein 2021). The decolonial strand, at the level of knowing, problematizes ascriptions of universality to western modernity. Where knowledge creation and dissemination are concerned, the decolonial paradigm, particularly influenced by Indigenous approaches, grapples with boundary questions about how far the remit of positivist science even legitimately extends. Reconciliation is ultimately about being together but the varied experiences of attempts at achieving it surveyed here and in subsequent parts remind us of the real issue at stake: are other ways of being accounted for in reimagined futures or is reconciliation the vehicle for ossification of the hegemonic worldview?

Reconciliation at its core is about acknowledging reciprocal truths with the idea of leaving injustices behind to secure continued coexistence. On a broader level, reconciliation entails reparative justice with interventions focused either on individual or collective grievance. These interpretations of reconciliation are problematic because: a) they make reconciliation contingent upon the goodwill of the state/the dominant group/those responsible for wrongdoing and b) they ultimately contribute to strengthening existing structures via co-option of the

aggrieved. Hence, reconciliation in a profound sense must be about re-establishment. Not only does this understanding fully acknowledge the indispensability of self-determination, but it also goes to the socially constituted and systemically perpetuated nature of harm. In Anzaldúa's (2002) own words:

“Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. (...) Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. [...] living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling.” (p. 1)

Thus, Nepantla underscored the need for a mindful approach to this intended transition.

Reconciliation, thus reframed as in-betweenness, is undertaking brick-by-brick the arduous work of building bridges back to ourselves. In earlier work (Unkule, 2018), I have reimagined study abroad as an undertaking in studying one's own context rather than an exercise in further essentialising and particularising the other (in a bid to attain “cultural competence”), ultimately enabling us to see all beings as oneself. According to Anzaldúa (2002, p. 2), where once the struggle was about recognition of difference, “today we grapple with the recognition of commonality within the context of difference.” The idea of witnessing may be deployed to clarify the operative, tactical, and pedagogical aspects of enabling such learning and transformation through study abroad. Nagy (2020, p. 221) sees potential in the discomfort produced by survivor testimony – akin to the unsettling that in-betweenness triggers – not merely “reckoning” but beyond that for “transformation of Indigenous-settler relationships.”

Correspondingly, study abroad practice must step away from a comfort zone erected around facile associations of experiential learning with development of intercultural competence, unexamined hypotheses about diversity automatically ensuring expression of diverse viewpoints, and the conflation of training to develop a tolerant (woke) manner without fundamentally recognising the politics of knowledge creation. What the practice needs, in other words, is an epistemic and cognitive break – a falling apart – driven by the realization that learned superiority and inferiority need to be unlearned before intercultural dialogue is attempted – just as international higher education can assume a reparative stance only after divesting from systems that perpetuate extraction and exploitation as the first step.

Part two of this series will outline three possibilities for reconstituting study abroad with an emphasis on reconciliation understood as in-betweenness.

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