

Whole Human Pedagogy for Education Abroad

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Abstract

This research derives a novel framework called whole human pedagogy, which centers four tenets—embodiment, emotions, belonging, and becoming—for implementing and analyzing education abroad programs. Embodiment incorporates bodies and bodily knowledge into teaching and learning. Emotions addresses the importance of feelings and reflection. Belonging centers relationality, learning communities, and mutuality. Becoming encompasses the notions that learning deeply affects the way humans exist in the world, that learning is meaningful and transformative, and that learning can “connect the will to know with the will to become” (hooks, 1994, pp. 18-19). This qualitative study draws on the semi-structured interview responses of seventeen education abroad practitioners who offer their perspectives to inform this new theoretical approach. The resulting framework can improve educational interventions, destabilize Euro-U.S. epistemological dominance, and prioritize liberation.

Keywords: decolonial higher education, education abroad, holistic education, pedagogy

Introduction

This study proposes the novel framework “whole human pedagogy,” which centers four tenets (embodiment, emotions, belonging, and becoming) for approaching students as integrated human beings with bodily, emotional, relational, and meaning-making-oriented knowledge. This framework, informed by hooks (1994), Thompson (2016), and decolonial theory, imagines alternative futures of education abroad based on the inclusion of diverse knowledge sources. This study asks: how do practitioners understand a whole human pedagogical approach, specifically regarding the four themes of embodiment, emotions, belonging, and becoming?

Literature Review

Whole human pedagogy offers a framework for an alternative, decolonial approach to education abroad praxis. To that end, this research primarily draws on three literature areas: education abroad and experiential learning, decolonial theory, and alternative pedagogies. Education abroad largely relies on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which argues that "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb & Kolb, 2017, p. 11) and explains four phases of experiential learning: experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). This notion has deeply informed contemporary education abroad praxis and inspired widespread emphases on experiences and reflection, which can include embodied and emotional knowledge that is often excluded from non-experiential forms of U.S. higher education.

Decolonial theory rejects Euro-U.S. epistemological dominance and values alternative forms of knowing (Sicka & Hou, 2023). Stein (2021) critiques the contemporary U.S. higher education "field imaginary" and calls for reimagined approaches that "(1), critique ways of knowing, being, and relating that are premised on systemic and ongoing colonial violence, and (2) gesture toward possible futures in which these colonial patterns of knowledge, existence, and relationship are interrupted and redressed" (p. 2). The creation of whole human pedagogy addresses the first point by critiquing the exclusion of embodied, emotional, relational, and transformative knowledge and advocating instead for their intentional inclusion in academic spaces. The participant perspectives presented fulfill the second point by imagining new futures of innovative praxis that embrace diverse forms of knowledge.

Alternative pedagogies, like contemplative and critical pedagogies, offer examples of teaching practices that incorporate repressed knowledges and thus, rebel against dominant Euro-U.S. educational norms. While alternative pedagogies have expanded in classroom contexts (Thompson, 2016), literature about alternative pedagogies in education abroad remains scarce (Conboy & Clancy, 2022; Taylor & Deschert, 2022). Whole human pedagogy responds to this gap in literature by creating an alternative pedagogical model for education abroad specifically.

Theoretical Framework

Education abroad presents a unique opportunity to intentionally emphasize human learning in praxis. This study derives the novel framework whole human pedagogy using Thompson's (2016) *Teaching with Tenderness* and hooks' (1994) *Teaching to Transgress*. Thompson (2017) explains her own "tenderness pedagogy" which emphasizes attentiveness, vulnerability, embodiment, mindfulness, and justice. hooks (1994) introduces her "engaged pedagogy," which centers participants' presence and creates interactive spaces of communal learning that emphasize critical thinking, wellbeing, and self-actualization. Through in-depth conceptual mapping of Thompson (2017) and hooks (1994), this study derived four areas of thematic commonality, which inform the theoretical basis for the creation of a novel framework for education abroad called whole human pedagogy.

Whole human pedagogy includes four tenets: embodiment, emotions, belonging, and becoming. *Embodiment*, an attentiveness to bodies and bodily sensations, explores how traditional academia disallows bodily knowledge and how bringing bodies back into education may make learning more comprehensive and less oppressive. *Emotions* addresses the importance of feelings and reflection in learning. *Belonging* centers relationality and emphasizes cultivating learning communities informed by mutual knowing. Lastly, *becoming* encompasses the notions that learning deeply affects the way humans exist in the world and that learning is meaningful and transformative.

Methodology

This qualitative study used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit education abroad practitioners who work(ed) in roles designing, administering, or facilitating programs at U.S.-based organizations serving undergraduates. Participants spanned various types of responsibilities, experiences, and institutions. Sampling sought participants who expressed interest in a brief written description of the proposed tenets of whole human pedagogy; thus, this study observes a population engaging with whole human learning and does not generalize results or evaluate how common these practices are.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews in Fall 2023 after IRB approval. Seventeen participants completed 60-90-minute, semi-structured, virtual interviews wherein they shared their perspectives on the concept of whole human pedagogy with light prompting about the four tenets. Interview responses were transcribed and analyzed in NVivo using primarily inductive coding to identify emergent themes across interview data (Saldaña, 2011). Participants were offered opportunities for transcript review and response de-identification.

Findings

Participants understood approaching students as whole human beings as central to their work and consistently showed enthusiasm for increased research on whole human teaching and learning in education abroad. The four tenets of embodiment, emotions, belonging, and becoming, as defined above, provided the theoretical framework of analysis. Most practitioners described two or three of the tenets without prompting; most participant responses fit into one of the four tenets; and all four tenets were explored at various points in the data.

Embodiment

Participants understood embodiment as foregrounding education abroad. Andrea shared, “Education abroad is par excellence—a physical, embodied, embedded experience.” Many participants use physically immersive elements as tools for learning about culture and the environment of the host location. Subthemes of embodiment include place-based understandings that embrace sensory processing and local ecosystems; amount, duration, and type of physical activity; space and interpersonal mannerisms; mindfulness; experiential learning; and embodied experiences of intersectional identities.

Emotion

Many participants had thought extensively about emotions, largely connected to culture shock and reflection in the experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Several noted emotional discomfort was key to student development. Subthemes of this tenet were: the importance of setting expectations and normalizing emotions, largely through orientation programming and transparency around culture shock; and reflection through structured individual and group processing activities. Daniel explained, “It’s as if everything else you did that day is just the reason to get to the reflection.”

Belonging

Conversations about belonging centered participants’ understandings of their own role and relationships within their program group. Many rejected the notion of facilitators as hierarchal figureheads and instead emphasized communal contributions. They used various metaphors to describe their relationship with students: Eric called himself a friend; Olivia, a mentor; Catalina, a tía. In the relationship between themselves and their students, participants discussed the importance of knowing students individually and embracing reciprocity. In relationships within the group, participants emphasized developing learning communities, co-creating knowledge, and cultivating vulnerability and trust.

Becoming

Many participants understood the tenet of becoming as the core of their mission in education abroad. Many immediately gravitated towards the words “transformation” or “transformative.” Participants hope students will be profoundly affected by their education abroad experiences. Catalina saw her students “finding calling, recognizing their own gifts and being able to connect them and see how those gifts function in the world.” Many linked this core value to their own education abroad experiences, their belief in the field, and/or their hopes for the field moving forward. Subthemes of this tenet included the notion of transformation, as well as discussions of self-knowing and self-sufficiency.

Discussion

The data collected offer preliminary confirmation that whole human pedagogy constitutes a compelling framework for thinking about education abroad praxis. In addition to informing educator’s practices, whole human pedagogy comprises a general posture towards students and the processes of teaching and learning. That approach centers collaboration, presence, mutuality, creativity, and wellbeing. Whole human pedagogy informs educational philosophies, motivations, and goals, as well as self-reflexivity for educators. These goals destabilize dominant Euro-U.S. epistemological values by centering the diversity of human knowledge over traditional values like competition, perfection, separation, and monoculturalism (Rendón, 2014).

Thirteen participants directly answered the question: “Why does approaching students as whole human beings matter for education abroad?” One reason that reverberated throughout their responses is that students *are* whole human beings. When practitioners revere learning as an expansive process of being, relating, knowing, and growing, practitioners come to an understanding that education abroad learning is inherently human. Further, when they intentionally invite whole humanness with praxis that centers integration and liberation, they have the potential to revolutionize the field’s understanding of quality teaching and learning.

Significance

Theoretically, whole human pedagogy offers a novel approach to holistic education tailored to education abroad, which responds to the call for scholarship on intentional interventions in intercultural learning (Vande Berg et. al, 2012) and wider calls for integration in education (hooks, 2010; Thompson, 2017). Additionally, whole human pedagogy constitutes a rebellion against dehumanization (Freire, 1970) and a method of embracing repressed types of knowledge, which are both central to the pursuit of individual, communal, and global liberation, particularly from the lens of decolonial CIE.

In practice, whole human pedagogy offers a model applicable to program development, wherein practitioners can either plan or assess program elements based on their contribution to the four tenets. Whole human pedagogy can also be used as a professional development model for program leaders by providing concrete areas of focus and examples of implementable practices. Additionally, whole human pedagogy provides a theoretical framework for future research and analysis on holistic education abroad programs and praxis.

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