

INTERCULTURAL VOLUNTEERISM AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL: A CASE STUDY OF SOCIALISATION OF YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY BY STIMULATING THE DIALOGUE OF CULTURES

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Abstract

Globalization brings people from different cultures together for different purposes. This close interaction creates global diversity and challenges local identities. This scenario requires people to learn to gain intercultural competence and work collaboratively. Educators in many parts of the world have acknowledged their role in that process. The idea is to socialise youth in contemporary society by offering opportunities for the development of intercultural communication competencies in higher education. This case study describes and analyzes a program of intercultural volunteerism offered at a private university in Brazil for its students has sought to address the need to better prepare professionals and citizens for contemporary society. This program is based on scholarships for promising international students, follows excellence practices, has involved 600 university students in 4 years in 12 countries. One of the visible results has been the application of intercultural competencies and involvement of those students in follow up projects.

Keywords: *intercultural competence, intercultural communication, volunteerism, multiculturalism*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s the concept of globalization, although not new, emerged as a description of the “increasingly interconnected nature of social life” (Steger, 2017, p. 10). This complex and uneven reality is characterized by a new dynamic between the local and global.

The phenomenon of globalization has accelerated and intensified the exchanges between peoples around the world. Although people have always engaged in trade, conquest, and religious expansion, the new reality of globalization is a consequence of human advancements that has created a world with new patterns of interconnectivity. There is intense and varied offering of ideas, goods, and power through channels of communication, technologies, and travel. Since globalization is not a “one-way street,” through those interactions peoples and cultures are continuously shaped at an accelerating rate.

The free-market economic system is one of the foundational elements responsible for globalization. Besides, new communication technologies have fostered rapid global exchange of information, providing huge amounts of data to people in every corner of the world. The internet has democratized the access to information and learning by reducing distances, costs, and bureaucracy. In addition to rising economic status and easy access to information, greater mobility is also increasingly available for many people.

These developments have brought new opportunities, but have also victimized communities that were exploited in the process. If, on the one hand, they have tended to homogenize cultures because of its standardization practices, on the other hand, cultural exchange has produced a multiculturalism that is typical of the new reality.

The logical conclusion is that “globalization has made intercultural communication inevitable. Communicating with other cultures characterizes today’s business, classroom, and community” (Gitimu, 2005, p. 2). And, in order for people to work together effectively, it is essential to develop intercultural competence, which “refers to behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural situations to achieve one’s goals to some degree” (Deardoff 2006). Scholars identify three primary aspects of intercultural competence: motivation, knowledge, and skills (Lee et al., 2012).

Educators play an important role in preparing people for the new reality by helping them develop intercultural competence. Education in this century should contemplate the interconnected, interdependent, and diverse world of today. However, educators are still learning how to develop intercultural competence (Deardoff, 2006, p. x).

Despite substantial differences across international volunteer programs, nearly all claim that volunteers will increase their intercultural competence. Although people have believed that any exposure to cultural diversity will transform one's attitude toward people from different cultures, the reality is that there are predictors for the development of intercultural competence. The individual capacity of the volunteer, the institutional capacity of the programs, and the nature of the activities developed influence greatly the outcome of such experience (Bennet, 2008). Intercultural competence is related to understanding others' worldviews, cultural self-awareness, adaptability to new cultural environments, listening and observational skills, general openness to intercultural learning, and the ability to adapt to varying intercultural communication and learning styles (Lough, 2010, p. ii).

These are some of the desired abilities in order to navigate a globalized context. Good intercultural competence helps to manage stress, to develop empathy to other people's needs, and to deal with cultural differences, therefore, to become more effective leaders.

Among the different models, the developmental approach to intercultural competence focuses "on the progression individuals or groups follow in moving from lesser to greater levels of intercultural competence" and emphasizes "that individuals gain intercultural competence over time through the extent and quality of their interaction with people from different cultures" (Hammer, 2015, p. 484).

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) is a continuum that describes people's attitudes toward different cultures: from ethnocentrism, seeing their own culture as superior and all others as threatening, to ethnorelative, recognizing cultural diversity and possible contributions by other cultures. The different stages from this model are: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration (Bennet, 2008)

There is no simple answer to this challenge. No single course or seminar will be the final answer. Students need more holistic opportunities in order to develop intercultural skills (Lee et al, 2012). This article describes the dynamics of one such educational initiative based on the developmental approach to intercultural competence through a program of intercultural volunteerism for college students in Brazil. The case study methodology applied to this context proves to be useful for an initial descriptive exercise that identifies variables and observations for further research and for developing preliminary theory for testing at the risk of generalizability.

2. A PROGRAM OF INTERCULTURAL VOLUNTEERISM

2.1. The Institutional Context: a multicultural campus

Centro Universitario Adventista de Sao Paulo (Unasp) is a private Christian university in Brazil, founded in 1915, that currently has about twenty thousand students, attending one of three campuses, enrolled from pre-school to graduate programs. In accordance with its holistic educational philosophy, especially over the last 12 years, Unasp has intentionally developed an intercultural volunteerism program for its students seeking to address, among other things, the need to better prepare professionals and citizens for the contemporary globalized society. As part of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist school network, this intercultural volunteerism program is informed by the university's religious ethos of responsibility and service to the world.

Starting in 2013, José Paulo Martini, then president of Unasp (Engenheiro Coelho campus), established a plan to offer scholarships to promising young people from underdeveloped countries. This opportunity included Portuguese classes, as well as, any college degree offered on that campus. In exchange for working on campus, students received room and board besides full tuition. Conditions included their full support to the university's intercultural volunteerism program and commitment to going back to their home countries to support their own communities once they finished their studies

in Brazil. While studying at Unasp, these international students live in the dormitories with Brazilian roommates, and are fully integrated in the social activities, such as sports, arts, and community services. Students from different countries have participated or are participating in that program, such as Albania, Angola, Cameroon, Chad, China, Cyprus, Ivory Coast, Guine Bissau, Egypt, The Gambia, Greece, India, Iran, Israel, Mozambique, Jordan, Niger, Syria, Thailand, and Zimbabwe.

After international students have passed their Portuguese classes and enrolled in their regular college majors, they have the opportunity to return to their countries accompanied by teachers and students on short-term volunteer projects. On such projects, international students become natural links between the Unasp team and their homeland, and actively participate in the projects. This way they stay connected to their own context although with a new understanding that aims at helping them become a community developer after the end of their studies. After graduation, they return to their home countries. The plan includes continuous support from Unasp mainly through short-term projects.

2.2. The Center for World Missions

The Center for World Missions (*Núcleo de Missão*, in Portuguese) is the university's department responsible for the intercultural volunteerism program at the Engenheiro Coelho campus. It was officially established in 2007 and has the objective of developing the understanding and promoting the participation of college students in those projects. This department's activities are organized into five areas:

- (1) Research—promotion of intercultural studies at undergraduate and graduate levels;
- (2) Resources—production and publication of materials for all types of media related to their research and the students' experiences, including pamphlets, magazines, books, and videos;
- (3) Preparation—organization of training programs for the students every semester with the participation of experts;
- (4) Projects—sending of individuals and groups of volunteers for short- or long-term intercultural projects; and
- (5) Partnerships—developing relationships with other initiatives that offer similar opportunities such as Adventist Volunteer Service (Dias et al., 2016).

2.3 General principles

These are the general principles that guide Unasp's intercultural volunteerism program:

- (1) It involves short-term community projects with long-term commitment in different countries. They happen with groups of 10-30 students for 10-20 days during the school Summer break in January and the Winter break in July (they are related to short-term mission projects).
- (2) It has a holistic development focus founded on the areas of health, education and religion. They often involve remodeling and construction as well.
- (3) It offers a strategic geographical representation. Although the natural tendency is to connect with Portuguese-speaking countries, the university has motivated students to learn other languages, especially English. Currently, the portfolio keeps a couple of projects in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America. Students with different interests and previous cultural connections can choose from the portfolio.
- (4) Its projects have different levels of complexity, mainly due to the cultural distance. Projects in South America where cultures are fairly similar to the Brazilian one tend to be less complex. Projects in Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa could be considered of medium complexity, while Middle-eastern and Asian projects tend to be much more complex. Brazilians are very unfamiliar to cultural aspects in those cases which results in more difficulty to adjust.
- (5) It employs an incarnational approach. These intercultural experiences are designed to give the students the opportunity to experience life in these different countries as a local person. They live, eat, socialise, and move around as much as possible as the native population.

- (6) It is developed based on partnerships. Most of the projects involve an international student from that country who can help Brazilian students to learn about their culture and with translation while the group is in the country. It also involves a local organization (school, church, or non-governmental) that can help with planning, logistics, and continuity of the project after the students leave the country.
- (7) It abides by the standards of excellence of short-term mission trips, which are (a) God-centeredness, (b) empowering partnerships, (c) mutual design, (d) comprehensive administration, (e) qualified leadership, (f) appropriate training, and (g) thorough follow-through (Dias & Kuhn, 2017).

2.4 The Projects

The projects are divided into two brands. *Jovens Sem Fronteiras* (Youth without Borders, in English) is the brand for projects in South American countries and *FLOW* (which stands for “For the Love of the World”) is the brand for projects in other parts of the world. These are brief descriptions of some of the current projects:

- (1) Albania. The project includes undergraduate scholarships for three Albanian students. Since the first trip to the country in 2016, the university teams have focused on health awareness campaigns for the community and educational initiatives through children vacation clubs and, in the last two years, musical instrument lessons.
- (2) China. The project includes two Chinese students. In January 2018, the first group of Brazilian students spent a couple of weeks in China helping a local organization to open its healthy eating shop and promoting health awareness for that community. There was interaction with the local children through face painting at a local park.
- (3) Greece/Cyprus. The project has included scholarship to two students. Initiatives by Brazilian teams since 2016 have involved restoration of a community center, work in a refugee camp and a refugee shelter, help to homeless people, health awareness campaigns for the local community.
- (4) India. The project involves granting scholarship to an Indian undergraduate student. Since 2015, Brazilian students have renovated two elementary schools and developed medical camps. Currently Unasp has adopted an Indian international school through which it has reached out to the local community by developing health and educational initiatives.
- (5) Mozambique. This project has focused on help to build a school while developing health and educational seasonal initiatives. A Mozambican student goes to Unasp.
- (6) Chad/Niger. The project in West Africa has a similar approach based on supporting a local school and developing health camps and health awareness initiatives for the local population.
- (7) Peru. Two locations have benefitted from these initiatives. A local school has been supported while different community projects have been developed by Brazilian students (Dias et al., 2016).

Other countries that have received teams of Brazilian students from Unasp in the last ten years include Angola, Bolivia, Egypt, Guinea Bissau, Lebanon, Japan, Jordan, Paraguay, Senegal, and Uruguay. Only in the last 4 years, from 2015 to 2018, more than 600 volunteers participated in one of these projects.

3. DISCUSSION

This program seeks to maximize the exposure of young people to different cultures while teaching them to respect the differences, the goal is socialisation of the youth in contemporary society by stimulating the dialogue of cultures.

This volunteerism program works in two directions: toward Brazilian college-level students and international university students. It seeks to avoid a mere extraction from one’s culture that creates a culture shock that leads to the rejection of their own culture. Instead, this project does not break away

from the original culture but it adds a second perspective to one's worldview. In addition to the emic perspective, that is, internal understanding of a culture, the student also acquires an ethical, external, view of the same culture. This enables him to understand it better, develop better methods for that context, and influence changes to that worldview. As agents of community development, these students have obvious advantages. They know the local language and culture and are able to be much more effective as community leaders.

For Brazilian college students engaged in this program, it also avoids developing a sense of ethnocentrism and colonizing attitudes. One of the major initiatives in that sense is a preparatory class that they are supposed to attend. It is offered once a semester, usually over a period of one week. During this training session, scholars and practitioners share on different topics related to intercultural competence. Topics include globalization, diversity, motivation for volunteerism, intercultural communication. They also hear presentations by the international students on their culture and its uniqueness. Finally, they attend workshops that prepare them for the work that they will do in the different countries.

Observations about the attitude of students who participate in this program show that they are deeply impacted by this experience in many ways. On their return, the majority will repeatedly share with other people about the country, the people, and their activities there. It is as if they had become ambassadors of that country or culture.

Some decide to study another language and enroll in specific classes. Many will enroll again in the program to go to the same country or a different one. Yet, some will decide to go for a longer intercultural volunteer experience of one year or more. Therefore it is possible to observe improvement in their attitudes toward other cultures but also a very significant development: intercultural engagement. Meaningful, respectful, authentic interactions with other cultures.

These are three examples. One Civil Engineering graduate participated in the short-term Greece project in January 2016 and, upon his return, he went on to Mozambique and spent 1.5 years as a volunteer. An Education major went to Mozambique for a short-term project in 2015. As a result of the experience, later, she participated in a project in Uruguay, another one in India, and, after graduating, she moved to Lebanon to be a volunteer. Another college student went to India in 2015 for a short-term project and, later, decided to go to South Africa as a volunteer to improve his English skills. After his graduation, he enrolled in a year-long volunteering experience in Australia. This is a small sample of a number of cases witnessed in the last four years.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Effective and successful interaction in the current interconnected world demands the development of intercultural competence. Even the usage of the prefix *inter*, meaning between or among to emphasize the idea of mutuality and reciprocity, in the previous sentence helps to describe society these days.

Education plays an important role in preparing the children for that reality. Projects and strategies should be discussed for the different age groups and stages of development, including tertiary education. Among the different models, the developmental approach to intercultural competence focuses on a progressively becoming more sensitive to cultural differences.

International volunteering and service has been a current trend in different segments of society. It has the potential to promote international understanding, shared knowledge across cultures, global engagement, international cooperation, and peace. These international volunteers are in a unique position to acquire intercultural competence and develop intercultural engagement. However, that does not happen automatically and as it is dependent on specific principles.

The intercultural volunteerism project developed at the college level at Unasp, in Brazil, seems to seek to offer that kind of ideal experience. Its goal is to socialise youth in today's diverse contemporary society by offering opportunities for the development of intercultural communication competencies in

higher education. It contemplates opportunities for the students to experience others cultures outside the classroom through actual interactions.

This program involves fostering campus cultural diversity through the presence of international students who become a natural connection to their own countries. It also promotes short-term trips with nationals to introduce college students to other cultures. This initiative is based on specific principles that include research, training, and practice. It has short- and long-term plans that accounts for continuity in a variety of countries.

Observation of the students who participate in this program shows that they are deeply impacted by the experience, which is demonstrated by their attitude toward other cultures. Students show excitement and want to share with others about their experiences, they develop social initiatives in Brazil, they enroll to participate in other short-term projects in the same country or other countries, and they decide to spend a year or more volunteering in a different country.

This volunteerism project seems to be a successful initiative to help college students learn how to deal with cultural differences and consequently socialise in current society turning them into efficient professionals, community leaders, and agents of transformation. Further research could apply specific surveys to assess the participants' change of attitude toward cultural difference related to their participation in the program.

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