

BEYOND BORDERS: PLANTING SEEDS OF CONSCIENTIZATION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

University international experience programs generally emphasize activities which nurture language skills and/or cross-cultural sensitization. Through a pilot project, St. Jerome's University has developed a unique model in cooperation with the Ternopil Pedagogical National University (Ukraine). While providing language-education and cultural sensitization through a 90-day placement for Canadian students in Ternopil, Ukraine, the main focus of the placement is working (volunteer) in Petryky Internat with abandoned young women and children with disabilities. In order to prepare the students for the experience they are obligated to take two university credited half-courses in the year prior to their placement. The courses and experience focus on a) sensitizing the students to issues of North-South disparity, disability, and political/social marginalization; and b) the model of being a co-learner during the placement, rather than an "aid worker". Over the pilot period the Canadian students have remarked on their personal transformation and political maturation whereas in Ternopil we have recognized new attitudes towards the residents of the Internat, both among the staff, University students, University administration, and city-dwellers. The paper will highlight major aspects of this program from the critical perspective of Disability Studies and suggests it as a model for other universities.

Key Words: *Planting seeds of conscientization, social transformation*

INTRODUCTION

The Petryky Project began in 2005 as a collaborative international student volunteer placement involving St. Jerome's University (Canada), Ternopil National Pedagogical University, Petryky Internat (both of Ukraine), and, for the first two years, the Canadian NGO Intercordia. Unlike other international programs for university students, this project placed Canadian students in an immersion setting with girls with an array of disabilities.

We are excited about this program because of the effects it has had on all participants. We believe it offers a flexible paradigm with great potential to be adapted to suit any university situations, as long as the theoretical underpinnings are understood and maintained. We hope that this project generates further international programs that may lead students to be creators of a world with greater mutual understanding amongst all people.

Why, during an international educational experience, would we want our students to volunteer their time at an orphanage or Internat (as they are called in Ukraine) for children with disabilities? No doubt we agree that international education should broaden one's horizons, teach one about the world, and oneself. As educators, we believe students need to experience the unknown in the world, in order to encounter themselves. It is precisely for these reasons that we believe our students need to work at the internat. However, it is critical to understand what this placement is *not* intended to be: it is *not* charity where students are to feel good about themselves because they interact with individuals who are unwanted or difficult to be with in some way. It is absolutely essential that students resist the impulse to imagine a power differential whereby they "do" something "for" others and, consequently, are magnanimous.

The power of this placement to effect personal and community change arises from its theoretical grounding in Disability Studies in the humanities (DS). Disability Studies is a growing discipline in universities that can be compared to Feminist and Gender studies in its capacity to shift entrenched perceptions about people's placement in societies and cultures throughout history.

DS explores how the extraordinary body has been exploited to construct the idea of normalcy and difference. A social model of disability offers a way to liberate our thinking from the medicalized model of disability, which has predominated Western cultures for a few centuries now. (Appendix A)

The medical model makes disability deviant, as if bodily anomalies and limitations were not a universal reality; as if what we see as disability was not an ordinary fact of being human. It punishes the individual for having a body that will not conform to an artificial standard of perfection. This medicalized perception of disability has generated stigma, fear, and oppression.

The social model has been an essential tool in helping us to recognize the processes of medicalization and how disability is shaped by societal structures and attitudes. While understanding this can be personally liberating, prejudice can only be dismantled with

our conscious effort to unlearn our enculturated biases that contribute to discriminatory systems.

This introduction to a social model is to demonstrate how our students can begin to approach difference in others: not as a devalued opposition to themselves as representatives of normalcy, but rather as human beings who are wondrously diverse. The more we are willing to admit and engage with human diversity, the more we can be willing to accept and appreciate our selves, our humanness, and the ways we are dependent on others. From encountering “others” we appreciate the unknown ways we might learn from each other. We experience the interdependence that underpins all humanity.

Disability is a human constant—bodily variability, impairment, or limitations permeate all cultures, times, demographics. Whether or not a personal trait is disabling or not depends on shifting variables such as context, environment, relationships. People with disabilities have been marginalized in our societies, while disability as deviance has generated a lucrative industry of management that has obscured the fact that this human category is the only one that any person can enter at any time, just by the slip of a foot, or living long enough.

This social view of disability provides the students with a solid foundation from which to approach a culture and language foreign to them. When they arrive in Ukraine, the students undergo the immersion experience: residing in a family home and attending language classes. At the Internat they must learn to interact and engage with children and girls not far from their own age. Neither English nor Ukrainian may be needed for conversation. They must learn to meet the humanity of the residents of the internat with their own humanity. Our students have little chance to feel superior in that placement since they, without language or status, are also in a vulnerable situation. Although in entirely different ways, the position of vulnerability of students and residents can connect on a level of intrinsic respectful dignity for each other’s humanity. This is the underlying theory of our approach.

Although St. Jerome's University had in 2004-5 established a partnership with Intercordia Canada, the Ternopil-Petryky placement was established on our own initiative. It was a unique placement for us, for a number of reasons. First, we coordinated it ourselves. Second, it was the only placement where the local support (Internat staff) was not English speaking. Third, given previous Intercordia experience in Ukraine, we were convinced that prior to commencing work in the Internat, our students needed some intense language preparation. Fourteen students have worked at Petryky from our program.

The student preparation begins in the Fall before the summer placement. The course, taken as a cohort, addresses questions of international development, economic and social inequality, and community health. Students are introduced to the work of Paulo Freire and Jean Vanier. The course challenges the students to recognize ourselves as learners rather than "helpers." It is followed by a research course that focuses the students' attention on their placement country. In early May students travel to their destinations. In the case of Ukraine, students come face to face with an unknown language, often a less than hospitable environment, transportation systems which are unfamiliar, and public hygiene which seems wanting at best. They appreciate their warm welcome by the Ternopil National Pedagogical University personnel. The University's language program, directed by Dr. Olena Huzar, is extremely well organized. The first six weeks focus on language and culture training. Formal classes are held in TNPU with afternoon sessions often taking students off campus to work in very small groups (two or three) with local students (tutors). During this acclimatization period our students have a brief visit to the Internat, approximately a half-hour walk from the University.

The Canadian students' first visit to Petryky Internat evokes an emotional response. A feeling of welcome mixes with the shock of numerous voices in a foreign language attempting to communicate. Our students have commented on the cold atmosphere of the Internat, the crowded conditions, and the physical and emotional poverty of the situation. Nonetheless, the excitement of the resident girls ultimately makes the greatest impression on the students.

At the end of the six-week language course, the students spend a minimum of six hours a day at the PetrykyInternat. Significantly, the building is not easily recognizable or visible from the gravel road and most definitely not visible from any main road. In fact, many of the University faculty and students have been completely unaware of the existence of the institution and are shocked to learn of it from the Canadian visitors. Our students are encouraged to “be” with the girls, engage with them and their lives. Typically, as a state run institution, Petryky is understaffed and underfunded, but additionally, the residents are objects of societal rejection and denigration. Just as the structure of the building is out of sight of society, so too the inhabitants have been abandoned and hidden out of the sight of the community at large. Consequently, the attention brought by longer term visitors, who come not as paid staff or on social work placements, is refreshing. The warmth and sincerity of the relationships created with our students are clearly life-giving and, at some level, confidence building. Over the past six years, it has also become evident that the Canadian students have inspired change in the institution itself.

The dedicated program director of PetrykyInternat, Dr. IrynaPacula, has observed that as a result of the students’ presence, “the staff of the Internat has become more open to the children, kinder.” (Interview, Sept. 7, 2011). For some workers the students’ presence has been challenging: “Of course some of the staff are jealous of the exceptionally warm and honest response of the children to the Canadians, but this only encourages them to work harder.” Ultimately, Dr. Pacula believes that the staff has become “more open to the children, more considerate.” Transformation has also been noticed in local students. She notes that the Canadian students are able to establish good communication with the children immediately from day one. Students from Ukraine have a harder time: “Our students are afraid of relating.” From among the over twenty students from TNPU who were questioned regarding their previous awareness of the nearby Internat, only 30% had any previous knowledge of its existence. However, in becoming familiarized with the work of the Canadians, almost all the local students have shown signs of improving attitudes to the Internat residents. This kind of shifting of attitudes has also been noted in the University itself where faculty are surprised that even though they live and work beside the Internat, they are unfamiliar with it; yet, Canadian students travel thousands of kilometers in order to work there. This element in

itself may be adequate cause for some to step beyond the embedded biases, instilled by a medical model of disability, towards the notion of shared humanity. In summary, the presence of the Canadian students is gradually changing attitudes towards people with disabilities because it undermines expectations and habituated attitudes.

The impact of the summer program on the Canadian students is complex. At St. Jerome's and TNPU we regard the program as a success. Although we have no quantifiable outcomes, we believe that the simple and positive transformations in Ternopil warrant our positive assessment. But as the coordinating institution, St. Jerome's is most pleased from the evidence that the international experience has produced a process of profound questioning in these students, a questioning which defines liberal arts education.

In addition to the satisfaction of accomplishment, on their return, students also have faced challenges. One student admitted that severe culture shock upon her return forced her to reassess her academic direction. It was difficult for her to complete her undergraduate program. However, her greater struggle was to integrate her experience into herself, consciously choosing the sort of person she wanted to be. She writes: "My experiences also highlighted for me the privilege of choice and the complexity of choice. I find myself asking more questions and accepting fewer things as 'absolutes'. I live less rigidly and more lovingly. . . I do my best to walk a path of living that is rejected in every way by the dominant culture: that embraces vulnerability, that has a foundation in trust and relationships of mutuality." (E-mail, Nov. 9, 2011) Another student starkly admits: "The realities of my academic life in Canada were so completely incompatible with my experiences in Ukraine, I dropped out at the end of term and took a December holiday back to this place that was so life changing for me. The Internat for me was a place of severe material poverty, where cruelty and stigma towards disability, prevalent in the outside world, was reflected in the hierarchies and attitudes in the Internat itself. It was also a place of extreme generosity and love, where what little there was, was given or shared. Despite experiences of exclusion and abandonment, these girls retained the simple joy of children, pleasure at giving and receiving affection. They

taught me what it meant to recognize the humanity in another person.”(E-mail, Oct. 26, 2011).

The international student experience has led many of the participants into a conscious encounter with their personal values and beliefs. This process is rarely comfortable, but it is always life-changing. The meaning of solidarity has taken on a greater immediacy for some: “Solidarity was simply a concept until I shared time, food, and self with those folks. Practicing radical solidarity is very difficult—I find it to be a struggle to reject a culture of consumption and isolation, to stand with and hear folks who are victimized or oppressed in ways I may or may not know myself.” (E-mail, Nov. 9, 2011)

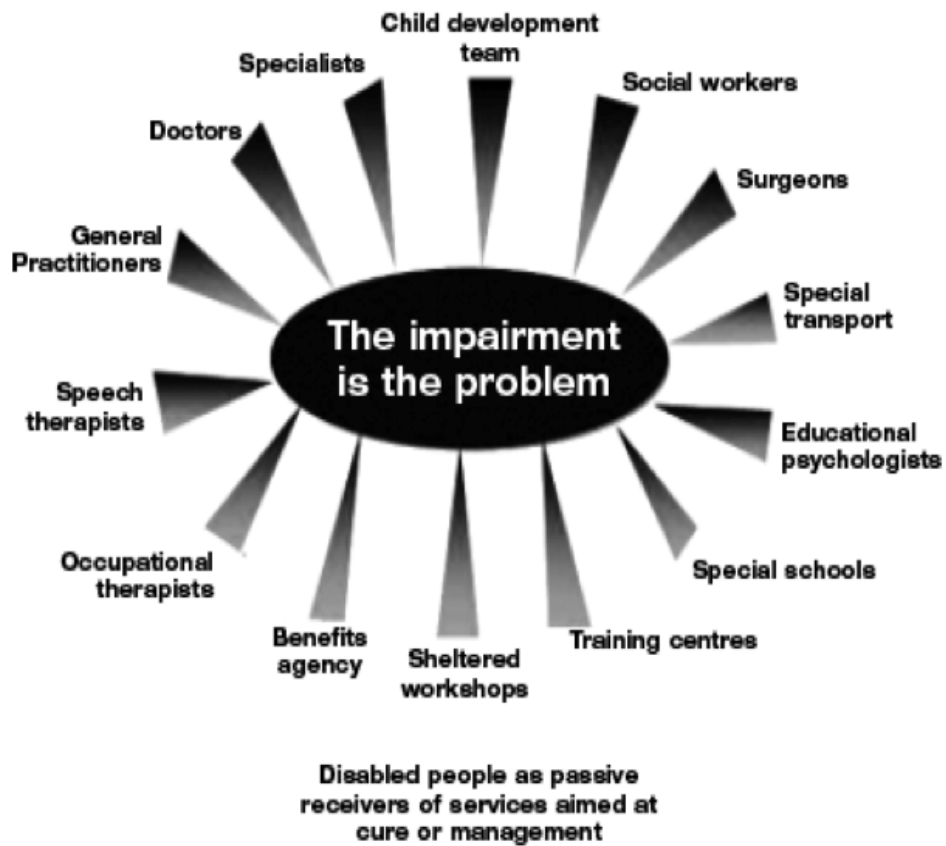
We are continuing the Petryky project and hopefully expanding it to another site in Ternopil. It is exceptional and unique in Ukraine. Although we continue to work at recognizing and addressing the shortcomings of this program, the experience of participants on both sides demonstrate its transformative value, and in spite of our contemporary focus on quantifiable outcomes, we believe education at its best converts us into the depth of our humanity, where we encounter our link with each other and the world.

We close with the reflection from a student:

Working with the children at the Internat formed the foundation for my further work in the field of working with people with disabilities. The building blocks of my personal philosophy were cemented, if not formed, while working at the Internat, particularly in two areas: 1) Working from a love based approach. This is contrary to my schooling, and my training, and any previous experience I had. You are not supposed to love the people you work with—apparently that is bad for you and terrible for them. Seeing the effect that love, caring and affection had on the children at the Internat cemented for me that this was the only perspective for me to work from. On a basic level this is what every single human being strives for: love and acceptance. 2) The person is the most important part of the “person with a disability” distinction. I think my anxiety (prior to my trip) stemmed from getting caught up on the disability part, and forgetting all about the person part. The most effective strategy I have learned to use with the populations I work with now is to treat them as normally functioning regular kids (while adjusting my

expectations to their ability level) which shows them that I care about them, I respect them and they are important to me, and in the world. (E-mail, Nov. 7, 2011)

Appendix A



The Social Model of Disability

