

Creating opportunities for lifelong learning in cross-cultural contexts: a Canadian/Jamaican experience

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Introduction

Increasingly, globalisation is shifting the educational terrain as universities are expanding beyond their physical and geographical boundaries to offer international programmes. In this paper, we explore some of the challenges, tensions, and rewards of developing an international graduate programme in Studies in Lifelong Learning (formerly adult education) offered by our Canadian university to students in Jamaica.

Delivering an academic program in another country is a complicated and challenging process. In our paper, we examine the practical ways we have learned to modify and adapt our delivery mechanisms and pedagogical strategies to be effective in a developing country. We explore the need to address curriculum changes, teaching styles, and administrative procedures for a different cultural context. Finally, we reflect upon the ethical concerns and power issues that need to be taken up when educators steeped in a radical educational framework are working with students in a developing nation such as Jamaica. In doing this, we focus particularly on concerns around race, differences in cultural ideals and moral beliefs, and tensions around financial concerns, exploitation, and privilege when programmes are offered by Western countries to developing nations.

Each of the authors of this paper has been involved in delivering this program for a number of years. Donovan Plumb was one of the two faculty first involved in organizing arrangements to have the programme delivered in Jamaica (see Plumb, 2003). Patti Gouthro joined the programme a year later, and worked intensively with Plumb (and in some instances, university administration) to develop infrastructure, change delivery mechanisms, and revise courses. Jim Sharpe was initially an administrator at another university, who because of his deep-seated interest in adult education, taught in our program and in Jamaica on a part-time basis. In the last year he has taken on the position of Dean for our Faculty of Education, so he is now more involved in overseeing some of the administrative aspects of this (and several other) international programmes delivered by our university.

In the first section of the paper, Sharpe discusses some of the concerns of creating a program that is not just 'parachuted in' without regard or respect for the cultural background of the country where the program is being delivered.

In the second section of the paper, Gouthro traces the development of the program and discusses the different kinds of strategies that have evolved over the years to modify curriculum and delivery, address student concerns and create a more responsive cross-cultural approach towards teaching. In the third section of the paper, Plumb discusses in more depth how faculty have shifted their approach in teaching to create more inclusive practices that transgress cultural boundaries.

Global and local benefits and concerns

Since 1998, Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), a small Canadian university based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, has offered the M.Ed. in Adult Education in Kingston, Jamaica (Plumb, 2003). With the success of this programme, the university has expanded its offerings to include B.Ed. and M.Ed. degrees in Curriculum and Inclusive Practices in Barbados, M.Ed. in Curriculum and Leadership in Trinidad, B.Ed. in association with local teachers colleges in Jamaica and Bachelor of Tourism and Hospitality Management in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. What is behind this expansion? What role do these 'off-shore' degrees have within Caribbean society? How do we understand globalisation, post-colonial discourse and emergence of Caribbean consciousness as members of a Canadian university providing a high priced product, that of an 'off-shore' degree?

Derek Bok (2004) in his book *Universities in the marketplace; the commercialization of higher education*, analyzes the financial, competitive and commercial pressures on universities to find new profit making activities. These include executive education, extension programs and the commercialization of research. He describes the commercialization of extension programs in American universities, from the growth of commercial correspondence schools at Columbia and the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, severely criticized by Flexner (1930) in his review of US universities, to the recent explosion of executive, mid-career and distance education programs offered by professional schools and universities today, denounced by David Noble (1997) for administration control of the academic work process. Bok concludes that universities and professional schools will often customize their curriculum to the marketplace while making a profit in the process that helps to fund the core mission of the institution.

It is possible to characterize MSVU activities in the Caribbean as mid-career professional programs, as they appeal to educators who want to obtain higher credentials for their professional practice. For the M.Ed. in Adult Education, many are teachers who wish to qualify for faculty positions in teachers colleges or instructors in community college who want to obtain a graduate degree. What distinguishes the MSVU program from other off-shore degrees is the partnership nature of the program. MSVU (Plumb, 2003) was invited to offer the program by Jamaican Movement for Literacy (JAMAL) and the Jamaican Council for Adult Education (JACAE). As Gouthro (2004a) documents in her article on the life histories of adult educators in Jamaica, the leadership of these organizations felt the need to provide a graduate program for adult educators in Jamaica. These leaders of the Jamaican Movement for

Literacy had received opportunities for study, travel and foreign programs throughout their life. They wanted to provide opportunity for a new generation of leadership to improve the educational institutions in Jamaica.

How then does the MSVU program function as both an externally driven, cost recovery, mid-career program and an indigenously sponsored, leadership development program? First, the curriculum has been adapted to the Jamaican context. A history of adult education course in Jamaica was designed, researched, written and offered to each cohort group taking the programme. Instructors in all courses use experiential methods to demonstrate the value of the curriculum to the lived experience of the students. Second, the nature of research required for the M.Ed. involves student projects, practicums and theses that focus on local experiences, issues and problems. This documentation of local experience will be invaluable for both the individual's reflection on practice and for the files of JAMAL and JACAE's libraries and databases. Third, is the professional growth experienced by students, both in their class discussions and reflections, and in the friendships and professional contacts that they have made. The program greatly strengthens JAMAL and JACAE's influence among educators throughout the island of Jamaica.

The professional educational praxis is not without tension and contradictions due to the globalised, commercialized context. First are tensions of race and gender, mediated by a colonial and post-colonial educational system. Beckles (2004) describes racial tensions in Caribbean society when the British dominated educational system devalues Caribbean experience and culture. Most of our students are women, for women form the large majority of teachers within the Jamaican educational system, but they do not necessarily identify with North American feminist educators. All of the students are black while most of the Canadian instructors are white. Students take the program for career advancement and betterment, rather than as a goal for developing a critical approach to their own realities. And the cost of the program is often crushing and debilitating, as the currency devaluations of the Jamaican dollar (worth less than \$.02 Canadian) force the cost of the programme to over \$600,000 Jamaican dollars.

Our response to these problems is to try to strengthen ties between the sponsoring institutions. Through a Canadian internship programme, a study of Kingston as a learning city is being directed by JACAE and staffed by a Canadian graduate student from MSVU. This project is providing the basis for further research and joint activities. In Halifax, the students in Studies in Lifelong Learning from Mount Saint Vincent University are working with the Metro Council on Continuing Education on projects such as a learning fair and declaring Halifax a Learning City. Through the partnership these projects are being explored in Kingston and Jamaica as well.

The partnership has been extended from JAMAL and JACAE to a number of teachers colleges and teachers associations throughout the Caribbean. The financial burden still remains an issue, but the value of the education is important both for individual career advancement and for institutional and

societal development. The graduate educational credential enables greater mobility and international career options. And the expatriate Jamaican community in Canada, US and Britain often provides important financial support to students taking the programme. The institutional partnerships and linkages provide an avenue for increased support, critical consciousness and models for institutional and societal change. The cultural resources within Jamaican society, (Howard, 2005), the music, the visual arts, and the vibrant material culture, provide a focus to base indigenous educational development. Through links such as JAMAL and JACAE have made to Mount Saint Vincent University, and through this path to wider educational and civil society organizations in both countries, new opportunities can be realized. Through the reflective research carried out by the students, both in Jamaica and in Canada, new bonds of solidarity can be found to face the social problems caused by globalisation.

Making it work – practical and pedagogical challenges

In looking back over the seven years that we have been teaching in Jamaica, we have obtained a great deal of practical knowledge about the need to think through delivery challenges when teaching in developing countries. For instance, initially, we planned to deliver our programme primarily using distance technologies. However, it soon became apparent that the taken-for-granted access to computers, the internet, and bridging technologies for teleconferencing were costly and not readily available in Jamaica. Faculty discussed options and determined costs for alternative teaching strategies that would still provide students with sufficient contact time. This led us to develop a teaching format whereby we send down readings and precourse work in advance, offer a two-day intensive workshop, give students additional work, and then meet for a second two-day intensive workshop later in the term. Since technology costs are so high, it is actually only marginally more expensive to offer more frequent on-site teaching workshops. This format provides added benefits because faculty can get to know the students better. In addition, with faculty in Jamaica on a regular basis, students can access regular advising and the administrative aspects of the program run more smoothly.

It takes more than a commitment from faculty to effectively deliver an international programme. New procedures and strategies had to be developed to accommodate the needs of students in Jamaica, requiring a commitment from all different departments within the university, including financial services, the registrar's office, and the bookstore. Faculty cannot be solely responsible for ensuring that students receive grade sheets, have their funds transferred, obtain university rings, or access library resources. Ensuring that students in international contexts have access the resources and support that all students deserve, requires careful planning and a commitment of resources, time and energy from many different departments within the university. Unless these concerns are thought through, because faculty are students' first (and frequently only) contact with the university, they are bombarded with expectations to attend to these details. This can create problems in overburdening faculty with administrative responsibilities, and is

frustrating for students who expect these concerns to be attended to. Hiring a part-time site co-ordinator in Jamaica has proven invaluable in smoothing out administrative challenges. Over the years, the relationship between our university and the local adult education organizations in Jamaica has been solidified by the recognition on both sides of the value of the programme. A number of our graduates are now involved in JAMAL and JACAE, and the research linkages are evolving into exciting possibilities for future work. In addition, despite the reluctance of many Jamaican students to have Jamaican educators teaching in our programme, we have been successful in having a couple of our graduates do some teaching for us. Currently, we have one-part time faculty member who is in the process of completing her doctoral studies from an American university. In years to come we hope to have greater involvement from our Jamaican graduates in our programme.

Learning to teach in cross-cultural contexts is also very challenging. Teaching in Jamaica creates challenges for educators who have a social justice orientation as there are sometimes fairly significant differences in commonly held beliefs. For instance, there is a great deal of discrimination against homosexuality in Jamaica. There is often a lack of support for feminism and women's issues, as there is more of a focus and concern for men's (perceived) disadvantages within the Jamaican society. Religion is often integrated into education in a way that is not common in the more secular Canadian culture (ie. Students will use quotes from scripture to support their arguments and classes usually start with devotions).

Small differences in cultural perceptions of courtesy and respect may lead to problems with miscommunication. For instance, Jamaicans often think North Americans are rude because they will jump immediately into a conversation, instead of providing a more formal greeting and query about the other person's well being. There are different cultural expectations about how time will be managed, which affects groupwork and negotiations around deadlines.

Finally, we must be critical of our own location and privilege as white educators and administrators working in a developing nation. The historical legacy of slavery, colonialism, and racism is not just something in the curriculum, but is threaded into the relationships of the present (see Gouthro, 2004b). bell hooks argues that 'the process of ending racism in thought and action is always a mutual enterprise' (2003, p. 78). If we are committed to democratic educational endeavours, we must continually assess our own practices to ensure we do not reinforce existing power inequalities. Instead, we must strive to create a teaching and learning community that will indeed foster a 'pedagogy of hope' (hooks, 2003).

Evolving involvement: Negotiating the terrain of cultural differences

From the outset, faculty members involved in teaching in Jamaica were acutely aware of the many contradictions that arise when people from a nation like Canada extend educational services to people in a developing country like Jamaica. Most universities already involved in Jamaica have a strong 'developmentalist' agenda, in that they aim to foster economic sectors that

perform well in the global economy. Six of the seven universities accredited by the University Council of Jamaica are based in the United States, and all deliver programmes to enhance business competencies of elite groups in the country. Our vision of our role and purpose in the country was radically different from this prevailing approach. In Canada, our program engages students in a deep scrutiny of metanarratives of progress and development that enthrall our world. We anticipated, in retrospect, perhaps rather smugly, that a similarly critical programme would serve Jamaicans equally well.

As we planned to launch our programme in Jamaica, key members of our collaborating institution, the *Jamaica Council for Adult Education* (JACAE), patiently encouraged us to offer as many 'bread and butter' courses like Programme Planning or Adult Education Methods as we could. Their contention was that Jamaicans needed to develop basic adult education skills to address pressing social issues like economic development, literacy, urban violence, family-life education and so on. We responded by offering mostly critical courses that questioned the whole desirability of economic modernization (of the neo-liberal capitalist variety); scrutinized the purposes of adult education in a globalising context; criticized the role of adult education in maintaining social stratification according to race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation; and posited radical (mostly community-based) approaches to adult education.

Interestingly, while one might expect people in contexts particularly ravaged by globalisation to be fairly open to this critical perspective, we immediately discovered that, in the context of Jamaica, critique of development and progress is, in fact, much more problematic than in Canada. When we talk to our Jamaican students about their reasons for applying to the programme, or review their *Statements of Intent* on their application forms, the Jamaicans clearly indicate that they want to have better opportunities for job promotions, or in other words 'to climb the social ladder'! For Canadians, notorious for our incapacity for candor, this response is rather shocking. Although it is probably very common for Canadian students to embark on a Master's degree to better their social-economic standing, it is quite rare for them to admit it. Instead, they typically explain that they are taking the degree because of their interest in adult education and lifelong learning. It is through this little gap, this willingness to learn about lifelong learning, that we wheedle our critical program in Canada. Students tolerate us taking them off the expected path until, *voilà*, they frequently begin to 'discover' a whole new way of seeing things. It feels to them (and to us) that the program does not require but rather nurtures or stimulates their transformation.

All of this assumes a flexibility, however, that is undoubtedly born of considerable privilege (acknowledging, of course, that things are never simply one way, even in contexts of relative wealth, like Canada). In Jamaica, we were soon to realize, flexibility is much more difficult to come by. Most of our students work full-time while taking our program part-time. While about half of our students live in Kingston, where we hold our workshops, others live throughout the island. Some students must travel three hours over tortuous roads to get to class. Inflexibility in the workplace makes it very difficult (and

costly) for them to get time off. Most of our students take our degree at huge financial cost to their families. With everything tallied, for our Jamaican students, the weight of this degree is many times greater than for their Canadian compatriots. And so it is for almost everything in their lives. So, as a result, the handy gap – that little space of flexibility and tolerance that works well for us in Canada – is not nearly so present in Jamaica. Students motivated overtly and unabashedly to climb the social ladder are not nearly so willing to question the social, cultural and historical circumstances that erected that ladder in the first place. They have much more important and pressing things to do.

Still, even without the flexibility gap, we gradually have discovered other ways to encourage our Jamaican students to explore the value of critical approaches to adult education. One way that seems to work very well is simply to encourage students to try to teach us about the ways teaching and learning transpires in the everyday contexts of their culture. The very act of explaining everyday learning in Jamaica, particularly if it is done collaboratively with each student priming the next in a widening spiral of remembrance and reflection, often stimulates the emergence of significant critical questions or realizations that create an opening for the introduction of theoretical analysis or other forms of practical investigation. Suddenly, no nonsense Jamaicans begin scrutinizing and discussing deeply held assumptions, about social status, about the subtle shades of skin color that signal privilege and power, about gender relations and sexuality, about feelings of shame with the violence and poverty than blights their beautiful country. We arrive at a place, as we do in Canada by another means, where students can join together and ponder the role of adult education in a world pressing us with demands for performance and plaguing us with mounting social issues, where they can begin to imagine ways to foster and support learning in institutions and, perhaps just as importantly, in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

Working across diverse beliefs and circumstances to teach in another country and culture provides insightful learning opportunities for educators and administrators, as well as students. We strive to negotiate change and create opportunities for learning while being respectful and supportive towards our students and administrators in Jamaica. While we are each committed to fostering possibilities for lifelong learning in the Jamaican context, we are also aware that there are many challenges to still be addressed.

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