

Research Poster

Lived Experiences during International Service Learning: A Semiotic Analysis of Photo Journals

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Introduction

International service learning (ISL) is a pedagogical approach used to prepare students to be global citizens (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011) that has emerged as a popular short-term program model for international experiences (Bunch, Rampold, Carter, & Blackburn, 2018). Many studies have evaluated ISL through examining emotion, cognition, and learning style (Hains, Ricketts, & Tubbs, 2012; Lamm, Cannon, Roberts, Irani, Unruh Snyder, Bredemuhl, & Rodriguez, 2011); however, few studies of ISL have integrated semiotic photo analysis into their evaluations. Photo-based methods are used as a research tool in many fields and provide students the opportunity to reflect on their learning and share experiences through their own perspective (Madden & Dell'Angelo, 2016). Combining students' photographs with text encourages reflection on knowledge and experiences as well as how they are related. Bost and Wingenbach (2018) used a semiotics framework to analyze the effects of the photo narrative process on students' intercultural learning, but the current study differs by using semiotic analysis to understand the lived experiences of students on an ISL to Guatemala. This project relates to Research Priority 4: Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016) by building upon literature currently directed at evaluating ISL.

Theoretical Framework

Semiotics is the study of signs and a theory of the production and interpretation of meaning (Chandler, 2007). Characteristics of an image through a semiotic framework include three types of signs: iconic, indexical, and symbolic (Lester, 2006). Iconic signs resemble what they represent. Indexical signs have a logical connection with what they represent and act as an indicator for some relationship (Chandler, 2007). Symbolic signs are abstract and do not have a logical connection with what they represent, and unlike icons and indexical signs, symbols must be learned, which creates a heavy social and cultural influence on them (Chandler, 2007). Considering symbols are culturally and socially imbedded, they are typically passed on from generations, and require more contextual knowledge than iconic or indexical signs.

Methodology

This research follows a participatory research design, as the researchers used their contextual knowledge through participatory observation to emphasize the voices of those being studied through the research process (Steinberg, Bringle, & McGuire, 2013). The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of participants on an ISL to Guatemala focused on coffee farming. The research questions were: a) What story do the four photo journals tell about participants' experiences during the ISL?, b) What iconic, indexical, and symbolic characteristics emerged from the photographs?, and c) What themes emerged from the narratives associated with each journal? Participants kept a photo journal of ten images and associated narratives to depict their experiences on the ISL. Both semiotic and content analysis were conducted on each journal entry. The researchers maintained inter-coder reliability through a comparative assessment of all 40 images.

Findings

The participatory nature of the research process was critical to the semiotic analysis, as the researchers had an understanding of the cultural perspectives and traditions that emerged in the images which could have been overlooked by a researcher without knowledge of the specific cultural context. The narratives with each image were analyzed separately from the image. Coding occurred using MaxQDA and yielded nine themes: *new perspectives, personal connections, impact of coffee, intercultural comparisons, reality of life in Guatemala, cultural values, impact of ISL, connection to photograph, and sense of place*. These codes were developed from 71 initial codes.

The semiotic analysis revealed varied layers of meaning in each image. This analysis revealed how four students perceived the same experience differently. Semiotic data, including the iconic, symbolic, and indexical characteristics, will be provided for a representative photograph from each student. Sparky, an agricultural education student, framed each photo journal entry as a chapter in his experience, choosing to highlight the relationships built and the impact of coffee. Semiotic characteristics for his images included notions of change, exchange, evolution, and bonding. Tony, a horticultural student, focused his images on cultural artifacts, coffee and the coffee plant, and personal interactions. The semiotic characteristics for his images included financial gain, travel, cultural intersections and interactions, cultivation, and juxtaposition. Ruth, a student of food science, included many cultural artifacts in her images, as well as images which represented cultural dissonance, such as trash and bucket showers. These were analyzed as cultural heritage, changing gender roles, financial security, and impact of coffee. She also framed each entry around the community in which it was taken. Celia, a horticulture student, depicted images of animals, plants, landscapes, and infrastructure. The semiotic characteristics present in her images included prosperity, financial security, precariousness of coffee farming, and poverty.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The confluence of both semiotic and content analysis allowed the researchers to investigate how students crafted their story of the ISL through visual and narrative methods. This process adds to the current literature of methods used to understand the lived experiences of students during an ISL, as traditional qualitative methods, like coding, do not always reveal the comprehensive story of impact and experience. The semiotic analysis allowed researchers to see what images were meaningful for the students and to understand those images and the messages they told about the experience. Combining the semiotic and content analysis yielded concurrent meanings through narrative and visual reflections, which, when combined with the researchers' participatory knowledge of the experience, informed future ISL projects for the research and teaching team. Determining new methods for evaluating ISL to better understand the lived experiences of the students is critical for service-learning pedagogy. The combination of visual and narrative methods requires students to think about what story they will tell about their experience, and brings new layers of meaning to the reflection process. The photo journal process allows students to determine ten images that represent and distill their experience. This benefits the stakeholders of ISL to see how students construct impactful moments, which can be used to modify future ISL by allowing for more activities that facilitated impact and learning.

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