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A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Meaning of Global Engagement Among Former Participants of a Backpack Journalism Program

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Abstract

This phenomenological qualitative study explores the meaning of global engagement among former students who participated in a Backpack Journalism course from 2010 through 2016. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher explored the meaning of global engagement as it relates to global education, experiential/project-based learning, and public interest communications. The resulting participant themes (community, unexpected/eye opening, discomfort, making a difference, and reflection/discernment) will further inform classroom instruction for upcoming Backpack Journalism courses and may serve as a guide for global educational experiences and public interest communications in other settings. Future research also is explored.

Introduction

Global engagement expands a student's worldview. As members of a global community, college students increasingly must recognize the role they play in a diverse world (Killick, 2013). As American corporations continue to do business internationally, their success depends on the ability of their employees to understand the communities and traditions in which they operate (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Providing diverse cultural experiences is particularly relevant in the United States where students entering American colleges and universities come from a variety of backgrounds and traditions (Bista & Saleh, 2014).

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The following research explores the meaning of global engagement through an experiential learning program called Backpack Journalism. Faculty developed the Backpack Journalism program a decade ago at a Catholic, Jesuit university in the Midwest. Since 2010, more than 60 students have participated in the program (Creighton University, n.d.). The program typically is offered every other summer. Students earn six credit hours in theology and journalism while traveling throughout the world to gain experiences much different from their own (Creighton University, n.d.). Students learn to shoot and edit video. They also engage in group discussions and write blogs that allow them to reflect on their understandings. The culminating activity is a mini documentary film that highlights marginalized populations or places. The films are screened at local and national film festivals; some of the documentaries have won awards (Creighton University, n.d.).

The Backpack Journalism program has opened students' eyes to challenges in other regions of the world. Whether it is a glimpse at life in the slums of the Dominican Republic, a look at efforts by Catholic Church leaders to rebuild the lives of Northern Ugandans following a civil war, or an examination of the plight of undocumented immigrants in the Mexican border community of Nogales, the experiences resonate with students (Creighton University, n.d.). Students in the Backpack Journalism program have traveled to the Dominican Republic, Uganda, rural Alaska, and the Arizona/Mexico border. The interdisciplinary program stretches students' comfort zones and forces them to come face to face with issues such as immigration, refugee populations, and climate change.

Purpose of the study

The documentary filmmaking program allows students to reflect deeply on the experiences of others and provides them an opportunity to engage with other cultures. Yet, to date, no qualitative, phenomenological study has been conducted to identify the themes or constructs of global engagement aligned with the students who have participated in this interdisciplinary program. The researcher seeks to understand the meaning of global engagement as it relates to the Backpack Journalism program and to uncover the shared ideas, feelings, and experiences of the participants of this program.

Literature review

Experiential learning

In his discussion of experiential learning theory (ELT), Kolb (1984) suggested four forms of experiential learning—four skills or abilities learners needed in order for the learning to be effective, including concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE).

That is, they must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences (CE). They must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives (RO). They must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories (AC), and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE) (Kolb, 1984, p. 30).

Experiential learning opportunities pair well with the desire of college students to engage in community or service activities that extend beyond the classroom (Brower, 2011). Students who are engaged in real-world service learning opportunities often express a greater degree of commitment to the learning process (Breunig, 2017). Estes (2004) suggested the way the instructor directs the learning may unconsciously promote a teacher-centered model. Experiential education, by its very nature, promotes student-centered learning. “Student autonomy, critical thinking and self-reliance can be encouraged throughout the action and reflection cycle” (Estes, 2004, p. 151). Through self-reflection students gain deeper insights into themselves and others (Breunig, 2014; Kolb, 1984).

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research aligns well with the development of experiential learning opportunities. Educators must consider both the theoretical as well as the practical for effective instruction (Boyer, 1990). Boyer (1990) further suggested academics must embrace scholarship in four forms—discovery, integration, application, and teaching (Boyer, 1990). The Backpack Journalism program touches all four aspects of this process. Students discover the world around them through the interdisciplinary program. Integrating their knowledge and skills, they create a documentary that provides perspective on the experiences of people at the margins. Through this process, these student documentary filmmakers help to educate their audiences about the lives of their subjects.

Global engagement

Dodd (2018) observed, “Globalization and pluralization have changed the environment and expectations for businesses in society” (p. 231). As the world grows more connected, students increasingly gain opportunities to learn in a global environment and engage with other cultures, whether through service learning activities, study-abroad, or experiential learning activities. American colleges and universities are increasing experiences for global engagement for students. These global opportunities are widely available in other parts of the world and with learners of all ages (Bista & Saleh, 2014). Through this engagement, students grow more confident and develop a greater degree of understanding about contexts or cultures that are quite different from their own (Alexis et al., 2017). Alexis et al. (2017) noted students who were participating in a study abroad program worked to adapt and embrace the cultural traditions of their host countries. Colleges and universities are even developing globally centered programs for those students who are unable to participate in study-abroad opportunities due to time or financial limitations (Feast et al., 2011).

As the international economic landscape evolves for companies, recognizing a diverse cultural landscape is critical. For corporations, developing an understanding of a host country's cultures and traditions can mitigate political, social, or economic challenges they might otherwise face (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Taylor, 2000). Often hands-on learning opportunities in an international setting provide students with eye-opening experiences they could not obtain through mere classroom instruction (Harper, 2018; Johnson & Howell, 2017). Yet, more could be done to provide global education, not only for students, but also educational opportunities for faculty training these students (O'Meara et al., 2018).

Public interest communications

Fessmann (2016) defined public interest communications (PIC) as “planned strategic communication campaigns with the main goal of achieving significant and sustained positive behavioural (sic) change on a public interest issue that transcends the particular interests of any single organisation (sic)” (p. 14). PIC is an evolving field (Brunner, 2017; Christiano, 2017; Fessmann, 2017). PIC can be present in an array of academic disciplines (Ciszek, 2018; Downes, 2017; Fessmann, 2017).

Raising public awareness and asking an audience to reflect critically on social issues have long been the tasks of journalists and the organizations for which they work. Community, civic, or solutions-based journalism remains a priority for some news outlets (Solutions Journalism Network, n.d.). Yet, the changing financial landscape for news organizations is forcing many of these institutions to do more with less. Brunner (2017) observed, as newsroom staffing shrinks and with increases in partisan and fake news, PIC holds promise to expand community engagement and to increase dialogue on social or civic issues.

To that end, Christiano (2017) noted the most effective PIC campaigns are visual and value-laden. They use stories, emotions, and distinct calls to action. PIC campaigns drive engagement to create long-lasting, meaningful change (Christiano & Niemand, 2017). Ultimately, effective PIC campaigns have the capacity to bring about positive, impactful social change. PIC “encourages collectives to band together and enact visions of social change that focus on the advancement of all of humanity” (Seyranian, 2017, p. 59).

Method

To delve more deeply on this topic, the researcher conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to explore the meaning of global engagement for participants of the Backpack Journalism program.¹ She arranged semi-structured interviews with former students who participated in one

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of five Backpack Journalism cohorts from 2010-2016. The researcher worked with one of the program's faculty advisors to obtain the names of students for possible participation. Creswell (2007) asserted by its very nature, the research of qualitative scholars is value-laden and subjective. The research design allows scholars to delve more deeply into understanding or describing an issue. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on objective data collection, qualitative phenomenology draws on the subjective descriptions of participant experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989). A phenomenological design allows the researcher to understand the complex nature of a particular phenomenon and to delve deeply into the shared experiences of numerous individuals (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Moustakas, 1994).

Role of the researcher

Given the subjective nature of qualitative design, the researcher came to the research with her own preconceived notions, beliefs, and biases. Prior to beginning the study, the researcher engaged in bracketing or Epoche, clearing her mind of these biases, and allowing herself to be open and receptive to understanding the ideas of the research participants (Moustakas, 1994). The process of bracketing enabled the researcher to reflect more carefully on the words of participants (Gearing, 2004). Storytelling is also an important characteristic of qualitative inquiry. Wolcott (1994) noted, "Qualitative researchers of analytical or interpretive bent are nonetheless expected to ground their reflections in observed experience" (p. 17).

The researcher received approval for her study from her university's institutional review board (IRB) prior to conducting participant interviews. Participants were assigned a pseudonym, to allow for confidentiality. The researcher made every attempt to assure the confidentiality of participants, although some may be identifiable based on the artifacts/mementos or research narrative. Study participants were informed of this as part of the study protocol. The researcher also asked the faculty advisor and the transcriptionist to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Participants

The number of students who participated in each Backpack Journalism cohort ranged from nine to 15. For this study, the researcher used a purposeful sample, interviewing 10 former students who were participants in one of the five Backpack Journalism cohorts in 2010 (Dominican Republic), 2011 (Uganda), 2012 (Uganda), 2014 (Alaska), and 2016 (Mexico/Arizona). Purposeful sampling is beneficial as it focuses on those individuals who will provide rich information about the proposed topic (Patton, 2002). "Subjects are chosen who are able to function as *informants* by providing rich descriptions of the experience being investigated" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 47). The researcher selected two participants from each cohort to provide insights from each of the Backpack Journalism experiences. In each cohort, the researcher interviewed one participant who majored in journalism and one participant who

majored in another academic discipline. Since women made up the majority of participants in each cohort, the researcher interviewed seven women and three men for this study.

Data collection

In addition to the interviews, the researcher reviewed three additional forms of data. The researcher asked interview participants to share or describe artifacts or mementos (photographs/souvenirs, etc.) from their Backpack Journalism experience and explain the meaning of these objects to them. The researcher reviewed the blogs the interview participants wrote as students to see how the recollection of their experiences compared to what they had previously written. The researcher also made personal observations by examining the documentary films to uncover any insights related to the phenomenon of global engagement.

The researcher conducted interviews with all the participants and audiotaped them. The interviews took place in person and over the telephone. The interviews lasted between 39 minutes to more than one hour. After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher read the transcripts to reacquaint herself with the data. The researcher coded the transcripts using the HyperRESEARCH software program. When possible, the researcher looked for *in vivo codes* that used the words of participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007). The researcher reviewed the themes and clustered the codes into the final five themes. Some of the codes served as sub-themes for the final five themes.

Validation is an important component of the research process (Newman, 2006). The researcher conducted several validation strategies as part of this study, including thick-rich descriptions, member checking, and triangulation of interviews, visual data, and written data (Newman, 2006). As part of the member checking process, the researcher sent interview participants one or two of the written passages to verify she was representing their thoughts accurately.

Findings

Five themes emerged from the study: community, unexpected/eye opening, discomfort, making a difference, and reflection/discernment.

Community

Students who participated in the Backpack Journalism program described deep connections they had with other students in their cohort. Whether it was through written blogs, nightly reflections, or the collaboration on the documentary film project, participants grew close to one another and established a community. Some developed lifelong friendships as a result of the experience.

Being in an unfamiliar place, students also took comfort in being part of a community of students who were sharing the same experiences. Heather said her cohort bonded in many ways as they developed a film highlighting the effects of climate change in rural Alaska. “We got along so well. And that’s really integral to the experience, a closeness that I don’t think I necessarily anticipated because you never know with a group of students what the personalities [will be]...anything can happen. But it just was so...perfect.”

As part of the Backpack Journalism course, the students spent time together prior to departing on their trips. They would spend several weeks together on location and then return to the campus to write and edit the documentary. Mia remembers the nightly reflections in Alaska when they would gather to discuss their experiences. “We became very, very close and trusting with one another.” Shannon echoes similar insights as she remembered her trip to Uganda. “I think that the experience with us, (laugh) creating random really deep emotions, and that can go from feeling extremely bonded with your team, feeling very proud of your product, you know, you’re very ...happy and lucky to be experiencing what you’re experiencing.” The theme of community was present in the blogs the students produced as part of their Backpack Journalism program. Photos of smiling students, arm in arm are scattered throughout the blogs with captions such as, “our wonderful family” or “couldn’t have asked for a better group.” Students appreciated the friendships they made during the filmmaking experience.

Students, some of whom have majors outside the journalism program also found community among other students willing to teach and support them. The participants felt the university where they attended encouraged students to form as a community. That notion of community was highlighted further on the Backpack Journalism trip when diverse groups of students came together. Erin suggested the community developed as a result of the students spending so much time living and working together. “Our lives were intertwined by this documentary, and so I feel that, in some way, makes you a community.”

Unexpected/eye opening

The experience of documenting life in a developing country or a rural section of the United States proved eye opening to students who took part in their Backpack Journalism course. For these filmmakers, it often brought them face to face with an unfamiliar culture. Michael offered, “It was my first global engagement experience.” Shannon added, “Backpack Journalism...was kind of my first exposure to a world outside of my own. So that helped me.” Steve said his time in the Dominican Republic altered how he looked at the world. Although students in his cohort discussed global and cultural issues prior to leaving the United States, experiencing the culture firsthand provided unexpected experiences. “I thought I probably knew everything. But it was shocking to me and kind of gave me...it was a shock to my system.” Maddie expressed similar feelings as she recalled her Backpack Journalism trip while filming at the U.S./Mexico border, “It was definitely a shock because I had never seen such resiliency and compassion in a population that had endured significant hardship.” Brooke and John, students who were part of

the first Backpack Journalism trip to Uganda, vividly recalled an experience that highlighted the desperation of people living in a refugee camp. During the trip, the group of students tried to offer small gifts to people living in the camp, such as toys or t-shirts. The students were swarmed by a group of the refugees and quickly had to leave the area because of the chaos that ensued. “It was a mass of people desperately wanting these things that we had brought,” said Brooke. For John, the experience opened his eyes to the challenges of poverty throughout the world and “how many people are without health care, without a job and without, you know, meal security... So that it helped me kind of bring that whole thing into perspective.”

For Gina, the Backpack Journalism experience was eye opening by making her more mindful of what she had as an American college student. At a market in Uganda, Gina was approached by a vendor, a woman who noticed she was wearing a t-shirt with her university’s logo. She said the woman hugged her and expressed excitement over the fact Gina was receiving a college education. “It’s always grounding to hear the parts of your life that you think are normal that are actually very much a privilege to have.”

Transformative

The construct, *transformative*, emerged as a sub-theme for unexpected/eye opening. The revelations about other people and cultures provided transformative experiences to some who participated in the Backpack Journalism program. Gina observed, “It was a very... trying to think of the word I’m looking for... profound experience.” Steve offered, “I would not be the person I am today without some aspect of this. I’m not trying to... oversell it. I just think that it really was a pivotal point in my college career, and it... it opened my eyes... to other things out there.” Michael described a transformative moment after he received a wooden cross, hand-painted by a man he met during his trip to the Arizona/Mexico border. Michael suggested, “It’s so easy to forget all these profound experiences that you have, especially in times that you encounter God, you know... my cross is a nice reminder... for me of that experience. And, I can picture the room; I can picture his face; I can picture him handing it to me. And it makes it all *real* again.” Brooke suggested, “I would say that trip... shaped me and the way that I experience the world. Probably shaped the way that I travel.” Brooke said the Backpack Journalism experience changed her career path. John also indicated his Backpack Journalism experience was a significant moment in his life:

In the seven years, I think it’s seven years since I’ve been there, I haven’t really found a better word other than life-changing. It’s not like I completely changed. My life trajectory didn’t really change that much from it, but it changed the way I think about things.

Discomfort

The process of traveling to an unfamiliar setting created discomfort among participants of the Backpack Journalism program. Whether it was unfamiliar language or customs, students had to embrace the unfamiliar setting as they tried to tell their stories. Although Steve said he was always the type of person who enjoyed new experiences, participating in the Backpack Journalism project took him out of his comfort zone. “I was always a little bit nervous because when you’re in a place that is not your home, you tend to have your head on a swivel...you just don’t know what’s coming and you’re always on.”

Shannon experienced feelings of being overwhelmed on her trip to Uganda, “I was prepared, I think, in all the ways I could have been, but whenever you go somewhere that’s so different from the environment you’re accustomed to... there’s just a lot to take in.” Gina shared similar insights:

I remember being very overwhelmed when we first got into Kampala. I mean, beyond the fact that there’s...more people and they drive on the other side of the road and speak different languages. It was, it was a huge shock, because there’s not perfect infrastructure.

Some of the students participating on the Backpack Journalism documentary came from disciplines outside of journalism. So, the process of making a documentary was uncomfortable in and of itself. Erin said, “Another thing that pushed me outside of my comfort zone was just doing this Backpack Journalism program and not being prepared at all. I mean, I am the type of person who likes to be prepared for things... I didn’t even know how to run a camera and I didn’t know any...journalism terms or what B-roll was.” Mia observed, “I came into this with no background whatsoever in photography and videography or journalism. So that, in and of itself, was an entirely kind of a new subculture to me, having to learn how to take a photograph, how to take quality video and everything.” Gina added, “I wasn’t a journalism major. I was not producing what I thought...was up to what they needed [in terms] of quality of film. I thought it was affecting this documentary.”

Interview participants also recalled specific, vivid moments on their trips when discomfort took hold. For John, it came when his cohort traveled to a refugee camp: “It was...full of people...who were...desperately poor; they had nothing...it was...heartbreaking to hear their stories...some of them...had family members who were taken from them...there was a massacre there...just a few years prior.” In one blog, a student shared the discomfort she experienced filming in the slums. She wrote about the foul-smelling raw sewage that ran through a canal in the center of the city and described seeing bags of garbage and rats near the water. For Heather, discomfort happened during a visit to a rural Alaskan community: It was “very jarring...to be in this village where they’re basically living in shacks. It was really startling. I hadn’t seen anything like that before in my life.” During Gina’s Backpack Journalism trip, a family member of one of the other students unexpectedly died. Gina’s classmate immediately returned to the United States. “It was already a very hard day,” Gina said. “And I didn’t feel like feeling things. You

know? I didn't feel like having to sit here and shove cameras in people's faces. I was like, 'I just want to be a human around other humans today.'" Yet, the experiences of discomfort proved empowering. During her interview, Erin described a memento she brought back from her time in the Dominican Republic, a hand painted picture created by someone who lived near the beach. "It...reminds me always of that trip. And... that moment in time that I decided to do something out of my comfort zone and it turned out...so amazing."

Making a difference

Making a difference by bearing witness through their documentary films emerged as a strong theme for participants. The five documentary films provide unique revelations about a variety of cultures and human experiences. They all tell the stories of people in their everyday lives. As Maddie explained, "Bearing witness is bearing the truth of others." Students recognized the work they were doing on the documentary earned them journalism and theology class credit. However, as students interviewed documentary participants and learned more about their lives, they were determined to do right by them and to tell their stories in a meaningful way. Erin explained, "I think in the end, everybody came out feeling the same way...caring so much about this community and wanting to make a difference with this video." Michael described it in another way, "Our work there was to capture...where we had encountered God...throughout that experience, and...show the story." In his blog, one student described the emotions he experienced during a stressful day of shooting video. Although he felt he was intruding on the lives of people who were living in challenging circumstances, he realized that through the video, he would be able to tell their stories more powerfully.

Yet, the fact these students were not engaged in traditional service learning activities was not lost on them. John observed, "We weren't there as a mission trip. We weren't there...as health care workers. We were there basically to interview people." Mia noted, "There's a big difference between helping somebody and being of service to somebody." Mia said during her time at the university and specifically during her Backpack Journalism trip in rural Alaska, she recognized her purpose was not to swoop in and solve problems, but to listen to and share the insights of the local community with others.

Making a difference today

The construct, *making a difference today*, emerged as a subtheme of making a difference. Work on the documentary has had a long-term impact for some. Several participants expressed a commitment to make a difference in their lives today. The Backpack Journalism class contributed to that desire. As part of the documentary on rural Alaska, Heather and her cohort focused on the challenges of climate change on the native Yupik population. Years following this experience, Heather shared the documentary with a co-worker who was skeptical of climate change: "Just having him watch it and think about it, I think can make a difference...I just continue to always talk about my experience with people." Erin went on to work in a field where

she has the ability to support underserved populations. She believes helping others was always her calling: “And definitely, the Backpack Journalism course was a part of that. But, I think it was always something I knew I wanted to do.” Shannon agrees, “I still want to make an impact...I think it’s really influenced my motivation where...I want to do something that sheds light on issues that other people aren’t thinking about.”

Reflection/discernment

Kolvenbach (2000) suggested, “Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively” (p. 8). In a Christian or Jesuit context, discernment is a process of reflection whereby an individual considers an array of possible options or choices (Traub, 1998). The Backpack Journalism program provided numerous opportunities for reflection and discernment.

Gina said she came away from the experience feeling more grounded: “I definitely started asking the question: ‘Do you need this?’ which I had never asked before, I mean, I was a 20-year-old girl, you know. And so, I definitely started asking that.” Brooke expressed a similar sentiment, “I think that experience certainly helped me to travel more intentionally and to approach people from other countries and different backgrounds...with more compassion.”

Heather agreed the experience made her more intentional. As she said, “I’ve always struggled to be more vulnerable, so even talking in reflection when we were there was really challenging. So, when I did open up...I always cried (laugh).” In her blog, one student used adjectives such as “spectacular,” “inspiring,” and “profound” to describe her Backpack Journalism experience.

For Michael, the experience provided him with new perspectives on which to reflect:

When you sit across from someone and listen to what they’re telling you, it is different than reading about it in the newspaper because that’s reported through someone else’s lens. So, encountering the people face to face was huge. And, you know, I...realize that it’s so hard to come out with a simple stance on such a complex issue because there are so many different people who are involved and there are so many factors that are involved.

For John, one of the mementos he took from the trip was a photo taken by one of the faculty members who accompanied the student on the trip. To John, the photo represented the juxtaposition of his experience in Uganda—the beauty of the country and its people, but also the extreme poverty and, at times, desolation of some of its citizens. Gina reflected on a video she took in Uganda as they were leaving a rural village and the crowd of schoolchildren were waving good-bye. “The video is... from...inside the bus and we were leaving...that rural village...It’s a very short clip, but I find myself watching that at least once a month...It makes me smile.”

During the trip, students participated in nightly group reflections. They also wrote blogs about their experiences. Wright and Lundy (2012) noted blogging can be an effective way for

students to reflect on service learning experiences and apply those reflections to classroom experiences.

Discussion

Participants of this study suggested the meaning of global engagement consisted of the following themes: community, unexpected/eye opening, discomfort, making a difference, and reflection/discernment. A phenomenological study culminates with the researcher formulating a composite textural and structural description of participants, then merging those descriptions to form the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Textural description

Creswell (2007) asserted textural description provides insights into what the participants experienced. Participants in the Backpack Journalism program experienced global engagement in a variety of ways. One of those ways was through the community they established, either within the group or the cultural connections they made with the people who they met along the way. At times, this engagement was uncomfortable and unexpected. Yet, they often leaned into the discomfort and discovered things about themselves, their classmates, and the people they interviewed.

These former students also experienced global engagement through their desire to make a difference with their documentary and to bear witnesses thoughtfully to their subjects' stories and struggles. Through reflection and discernment, the students experienced humility, gratitude, and spiritual insights.

Structural description

Structural description involves a discussion of how the phenomenon happened (Creswell, 2007). Some experienced global engagement as relatively new travelers in an international setting. Participants experienced global engagement through their work as documentary filmmakers, but also through the everyday interactions they had with other people, whether classmates, instructors, or people who lived in underserved or remote locations. The phenomenon presented itself, not only when they were engaged directly with interview subjects, but also in those quiet moments in discussions with classmates at the end of a day or through written reflections with their blog assignments.

Essence

The essence of global engagement consists of both the structural and textural descriptions of participants; it provides the culmination of a phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). For former students who were participants in one of the Backpack Journalism programs, the essence of global engagement involves *mindfulness*—being fully present or in the moment. A description from Steve highlighted the essence of the phenomenon of global engagement for participants of the Backpack Journalism program:

People would just sit and...watch the world go by. And there's a sort of peace and happiness that comes with that...you would just sit with people. You wouldn't necessarily need to talk, but you could just sit and be. And so, experiencing life that way, I think there is a richness or a wealth to being able to understand and to appreciate life for what it is and not for just the desire for more.

Unencumbered by digital distractions or familiar landscapes, and through constant verbal and written reflection, the Backpack Journalism program required students to be cognizant of their physical, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional states. For these participants, global engagement made them more conscious of the purpose and brought them closer to an understanding of the connection they have as members of the human race. As they found ways to connect with others whose cultures and tradition are different from their own, students understood the importance of engaging in a global landscape.

PIC presents an exciting opportunity for student engagement, not through professional public relations campaigns, but through real-world learning opportunities outside the classroom. Given the interdisciplinary connections available in academia and hands-on experiences available in the field, PIC campaigns should be a consideration for faculty who teach journalism or mass communication courses. PIC has the potential to span numerous communication disciplines, “When public relations practitioners and academics allow...for all voices to be heard, they are working in the public interest” (Brunner, 2017, p. 51). PIC may be particularly appealing to college students, in part, because young adults (Millennials and Gen Z) embrace social causes and are comfortable using technology to advance those causes (Fessmann, 2016). As Fessmann (2016) argued, “PIC aims at offering students with social activist interests an alternative, more focused route of developing communication professionals than the usually heavily corporate and agency focused public relations programs” (p. 20). Documentary films, such as the ones produced through the Backpack Journalism program, provide students one avenue for education and advocacy on a variety of social issues.

Limitations and future research

Qualitative research is not generalizable to other populations. Nonetheless, the themes derived from the study will provide valuable insights to course instructors on the ways in which students

experienced global engagement as part of the Backpack Journalism program. These insights can help instructors further refine curriculum and develop new assessments for future Backpack Journalism courses. Themes that emerge from the study also can be used to develop a quantitative instrument. Although not part of this research project, the development of a global engagement tool/instrument based on the themes from this research could be used in courses where instructors wish to create or assess class content related to global education. A quantitative instrument also could assess advocacy or engagement constructs that would be salient to a PIC campaign.

The Backpack Journalism program has unique components not found in traditional service learning or study abroad programs. As a result, would the themes from other global engagement experiences be similar? Future research may look at different cohorts of students who experience global engagement in other ways to determine similarities and differences. Additionally, the participants who were part of this study received their education at a Catholic, Jesuit university. Would themes such as reflection/discernment emerge for global engagement experiences at secular institutions?

Conclusion

Boyer (1990) posited, “If the nation’s colleges and universities cannot help students see beyond themselves and better understand the interdependent nature of our world, each new generation’s capacity to live responsibly will be dangerously diminished” (p. 77). The Backpack Journalism program provides students with advocacy opportunities and helps them develop greater empathy, global connections, and an appreciation for diverse cultures.

In similar ways, PIC efforts drive meaningful change (Christiano, 2017; Christiano & Niemand, 2017). PIC can be interdisciplinary and draw from a range of fields, including public relations, psychology, and political science (Ciszek, 2018; Downes, 2017; Fessmann, 2017). The Backpack Journalism program itself does not meet the literal definition of PIC. It is not a strategic communications campaign, planned and executed through the lens of a professional communications practitioner. Yet, it does meet the definition in a philosophical sense, as the production of these documentaries draws attention to various social issues and allows the viewer to consider or to take action on those issues.

The Backpack Journalism program shares the stories of its subjects responding to a variety of issues. Ultimately, the films serve as a means of advocacy, offering a voice to those on the margins. Aligned with the constructs of PIC, programs such as Backpack Journalism provide students a forum for advocacy and engagement along with hands-on experiences in storytelling and documentary filmmaking. The documentaries can help to raise public awareness and facilitate meaningful dialogue about a variety of social issues.

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