“That’s When It Hit Home”: Creating Interactive, Collective, and Transformative Learning Experiences through the Traveling Classroom

AMANDA MARIE GENGLER

In the epilogue to his book, Blood Done Sign My Name, Tim Tyson reflects on his experience co-teaching an African-American studies seminar that took a group of thirty-four students, five staff, and three professors from the University of Wisconsin on a two-week journey through the Deep South:

Black and white together, we rolled through Dixie, singing the songs of the movement and challenging ourselves to confront the deeper truths of American History. We held classes on the bus, on city sidewalks, in hotel lobbies, and at crowded soul food restaurants. Day after day, we met local movement organizers, toured slave markets and sugar plantations, heard great gospel singers, and talked with people whose memories of the movement made history walk and talk. Night after night, we huddled in hotel rooms and explored our deepest feelings about the meaning of race in America. (312)

He goes on to describe a particularly emotional visit to Destrehan Plantation in Louisiana—the site of a slave rebellion that resulted in the violent massacre of sixty-six slaves, the history of which was entirely expunged by the historical site in favor of a “moonlight and magnolias” narrative. This visit, he wrote, was specifically chosen to teach us things “that were impossible to convey any other way” (Tyson 313). The collective experience that day left a profound and permanent mark on each of its participants.

As one of the students on that trip, affectionately dubbed “the Freedom Ride,” I can attest to the power of that visit. That experience, combined with many others during those few weeks, became a turning point for my education. I understood the realities of inequality and the struggles for social change that shape and reshape our society in ways that I could not have before. In a sense, the trip sparked what Thomas Kuhn describes as a paradigm shift in how I viewed the world, my position in it, and my responsibility to contribute to greater social justice as I contemplated my own future aspirations.

This process of awakening is one many of us would ideally like to facilitate for our students, though the classroom does
not easily allow us to do so. David Cunningham and Cheryl Kingma-Kiekhofer respond to the limitations of the classroom by designing a similar travel course along the East Coast to explore processes of community change. Bringing students into direct contact with unfamiliar communities and the organizations they were studying, they wrote, allowed them to “break down the walls that separate the classroom from our subjects of inquiry.” Traveling allows students to engage directly with course concepts in ways that would have been impossible had they stayed within the confines of the classroom and their familiar local environments.

This is what I hoped to achieve when, inspired by my participation as a student in the “freedom ride” course and a later experience co-leading a follow-up service-learning trip to Selma, Alabama, another of our emotional stops, I partnered with Peter Green, a colleague in the psychology department at Barton College, to develop an interdisciplinary travel course for our students. Our experiences reinforce and shed further light on the unique benefits of travel as a powerful and potentially transformative pedagogical tool.

The Course

Our goal was to explore issues of identity, inequality, inter-group relations, and social change through an intersectional and interdisciplinary lens while engaging students in hands-on qualitative research. We chose Selma because of the connections I had established there and for the unique in-depth service project it would allow us to conduct: recording oral histories with local residents to contribute to Selma’s National Voting Rights Museum and Institute (NVRMI). A small homegrown museum, the NVRMI is dedicated to documenting the history of the struggle in Selma from the perspective of those who were there. Selma was a key battleground of the Civil Rights movement, where resistance to calls for an end to Jim Crow laws and the Black community’s demand for the right to vote frequently erupted in violence. March 7, 1965, commonly referred to as “Bloody Sunday,” marked the most severe eruption of that violence when state police brutally attacked six hundred protesters who attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge and march from Selma to Montgomery. Traveling to Selma would allow our students to meet many of those who participated in the movement and help record their work for future generations.

The course began in the final weeks of the spring semester. We met on campus four times for a total of nearly eighteen hours of class time before our departure. The students watched documentaries, engaged in preparatory exercises, and discussed material they had read. They practiced interviewing skills, began to grapple with the images they saw of state troopers clubbing and gassing marchers, and listened closely to the voices of those who had fought for change. They were shocked and outraged at all they had never learned in high school. Yet despite its utility, the impact of this classroom experience was limited. In the comfort of their familiar surroundings, the students could scarcely grasp the reality of it all.

This distance from the material they studied would be short-lived. The day after graduation, Peter, myself, and eight undergraduates piled into a fifteen-passenger van with a week’s worth of supplies and luggage. We had a rough itinerary, but we
were also prepared to take on whatever opportunities arose along the way. The students’ primary assignment was to keep a journal documenting and reflecting upon their experiences each day and to keep an open mind as the week unfolded.

Before we even arrived in Selma, the prospect of travel began to evoke powerful emotions. During the drive down, Jeremy, a white student, wrote, “I would be lying if I said I wasn’t scared. I’m scared of possibly hitting reality for the first time, because I secretly hoped that none of this ever happened.” Over the next eight days our students faced these realities head on. Their journals lend insight into how and why this occurred. The three themes emerging from their entries reflected learning that was uniquely interactive, collective, and transformative.

Interactive Lessons

Our first day in Selma revealed how direct interaction with people our students would never otherwise have met in places they would likely never have visited affected them in ways our classroom-bound strategies could not. For instance, during our on-campus sessions prior to the trip, we had shown Byron Hurt’s documentary Beyond Beats and Rhymes to encourage students to think critically and intersectionally about gender and misogyny in the music industry. As music was another pedagogical tool we planned to use frequently throughout the trip, we wanted students to understand the power of music to convey revolutionary messages as well as capital and patriarchal ideologies wrapped in heavy stereotypes. Our students expressed a great deal of resistance to this idea in the classroom, insisting that it was no big deal if the music they listened to was rife with sexist lyrics and images. The young ladies in the room argued that the use of words like “bitch” and “ho” didn’t degrade them personally at all. It just “isn’t really like that,” they argued.

This topic was quickly revisited with Joanne Bland, the former director of the NVRMI who served as our guide to the history, politics, and culture of Selma upon our arrival. As we paused for conversation on the balcony of an antebellum hotel during a tour of the city on our first day, Destiny, a Black student, asked her what she thought about contemporary Black music, particularly rap and hip-hop produced today. Our students listened enraptured as Ms. Bland movingly articulated the power of language to oppress and the role it had played in her own childhood and many others’ while violence and segregation reigned supreme. In her characteristic tell-it-like-it-is manner, she asked the women pointed questions about how they wanted to define themselves and the men how they wanted their mothers, sisters, and daughters to be defined. Their admiration for Ms. Bland and the power of the time and place of the moment helped them reconsider their consumption and support of misogynistic music in ways they had refused to just weeks before.

Later that day, Ms. Bland led them through the housing project where she grew up, ultimately bringing us to a small park next to the church where the marchers had gathered the morning of Bloody Sunday. She told each of them to pick up a small rock from the playground and sit down with her at a picnic table. She told them that each of them was holding a rock that one of her fellow marchers had stood on that day, and she shared that person’s story with them. Our students were captivated as she spoke, and this interactive
experience dominated their journals that night. Ebony wrote, “While sitting on the bench after collecting a rock, Ms. Bland spoke on people who met right there to begin [the march]. While she was speaking I kept looking around and I felt proud of being Black. I was proud that normal people stood up for what they believed in.” Jay was also moved. “She explained it so fluently that you could feel the tension outside. It makes me want to learn it in deep.”

For Brandon, a biracial student, his interactions with Ms. Bland became central to his experiences throughout the trip. One of his entries read:

[Ms. Bland] explained her experience with bloody Sunday which was pretty emotional to her. She was 11 when it happened, and she was placed near the middle of the march so she couldn’t see the beatings and tear gas up front. She thought probably just like many others it was going to be [just] another march . . . but this time they got attacked not only for 10 minutes but the entire day. Bloody Sunday. When she explained the lady crushing her head against the pavement, that’s when it hit home.”

For Brandon and others it “hit home” more powerfully than it had when we saw these images in black and white on campus, not only because they were hearing it directly from someone who was there—someone they were growing to respect and admire more by the minute—but also because Ms. Bland recounted this horrific incident as they sat on the very church steps a state trooper had pushed this woman down.

The oral histories we recorded played a similar role. One day we recorded a group interview with Ms. Bland and several of her classmates who integrated the local high school. Meeting the people who had been through this experience spurred our students to make connections between what they were learning from real people and course material they had learned in our traditional on-campus courses. Jay, a Black student, wrote of the interview in his journal: “I thought all my life that when schools were integrated that all the Black kids at one time went to [the] white school but they didn’t . . . it started that some kids went when they were in high school and then it grew little by little. So it wasn’t something that all happened at once . . . back then when all this was going on, being spit on, called nigger 24/7. That is something I don’t think I could’ve done.”

Students began to see that things they thought had “just happened”—or believed had just come about through legal means and then the walls simply “came a-tumblin’ down”—had actually happened through collective struggle and the immense suffering and sacrifice of everyday folks whose names they’d never learned in school. That night in our group discussion, our students were able to explicate connections between the comments that day and material they had learned in our traditional courses—tracking in schools, the self-fulfilling prophecy, stereotype-threat, and so on. Course concepts they vaguely remembered learning in the abstract—perhaps to recite on a test—were now made real, useful, and illuminating. Others began to link what had happened in Selma four decades earlier and the reality they saw around them today. Jay wrote: “Back then they treated [Blacks] with disrespect by spitting on them, [throwing] them in jail for nothing, calling them names, and making them feel stupid. Today they treat Blacks as niggers by not giving us the pay that we deserve,
the jobs that we deserve, and they try to keep Black people under them. Maybe on purpose, maybe not on purpose, but it happens.” Thus students began to overcome the “post-Civil Rights,” “post-feminist” narrative that everything is either “fine” now or attributable to personal failing and to see the path from inequalities in the past to inequalities today.

Perhaps the most interactive learning experience of the trip came during their trek through a small museum down the block: the Slavery and Civil War Museum, an offshoot of the NVRMI. Afriye Weekandoodis, who ran the museum at that time, developed an experiential “tour” that none of the students would ever forget:

We started to go into the museum and the lady Afriye told us and another group to put our hands on the walls of the building. A couple of people were frisked and were pulled out of the group . . . It was a shock for me for even the white people were being called niggers and grown men boys. As she took us to the boat we could hear cries from afar that (I’m not gonna lie) it scared the hell out of me . . . the thing is I knew this was fake . . . but it hit me spiritually. I felt like it was me actually getting called names and having to bend your head down all the time.

Both the Black and white students shared this experience, and were strongly affected by this experiment. For Brandon—whose father is white and whose mother is Black, and who struggled with his racial identity throughout the trip—it was a particularly profound one:

Right when we arrived we received the slavery treatment. We were told by our slave owner/director, Afriye, to get against the wall and lose eye contact with her. I was told to hold the door and crouch walk my way to the door. At this point I’m thinking this lady is nuts and she should be stopping any minute, but I was wrong, she kept up her act throughout the whole experience . . . she loaded [everyone] in a holding room, giving them the effect of closeness and tightness, something that slaves would be held in days on end. She explained this room as being tight, of course, but also muggy, sweaty, dark. The room conditions got so bad because not only was it a messed up arrangement, where are people going to shed their wastes? They couldn’t go outside so they stayed in the holding room and did it there. Now picture hundreds of slaves, adult or child, crying, screaming, mourning or dormant, with pee and shit on the floor just building up as days go by. Unbelievable. I don’t know how people could gather the strength to stand and stay strong against a power that was so negative for so long, that in itself is an accomplishment for Blacks . . . when the tour was over I felt ashamed and embarrassed but also proud of my heritage. You can guess which adjectives apply to each.

Later that night, our discussion of many elements of what they experienced that morning would lead to a deeper understanding of how divisions develop within oppressed groups, the tactics people in power use to generate those divisions, and the possibilities for resistance many find. Yet whatever academic ideas it allowed us to illuminate, this was possible because it remained an intensely personal experience. Their morning at the Slavery and Civil War Museum also captured another unique dimension of this mode of learning, its collective nature.
Collective Learning

Fourteen hours packed in a van, resting their heads on each other’s laps or shoulders, shared motel rooms, and constant proximity forced students to deal with the realities they encountered, and the emotional responses they experienced, together. Forming meaningful relationships with people they may never have spoken with on campus became a key part of their learning in the course. The collective nature of their learning was further augmented by nightly discussion sessions in a small living suite adjacent to the instructors’ rooms, where we engaged students in critical dialogue after a period of journaling. At times our discussions lasted for hours into the night as students wrestled not only with the meaning of race in society at large, but also its meaning for themselves in their own lives. It was here, during these late night discussions, that Peter and I shared the incredibly rewarding experience as teachers of watching our students ask tough questions, engage in conversations that otherwise never would have occurred, and transform into more thoughtful and aware young men and women before our eyes.

Throughout the week they bridged the chasms of race, class, and gender between them. This bonding process was also facilitated by their morning at the Slavery and Civil War Museum. As Ebony wrote,

> When we were in that dark room, waiting, many thoughts were in my mind. “It’s so stuffy and dark in here. Stay strong, Ebony. I CAN’T BREATHE! Stop trippin’ just take slow breaths. Stop freaking out. This is a reenactment. This is just a sample of what the slaves had to face . . . When I first heard the wailing and cries of the people in the other room, I jumped. I was so startled that I grabbed on to Kelly who in turn grabbed my arm. All throughout the journey nearly [sic] Kelly and KC was with me. We decided to stick together and I believe that is what happened on that boat. People began to join together with people they never talked to before.

For Ebony, this experience was strengthened by the fact that she was going through it with two other (white) women she had not known well at all on campus but had begun to connect with on the trip. This shared interactive experience both exposed and broke down the racial differences between them, deepening that bond.

Another powerful interactive experience defined by its collective nature was our walk across the bridge with Rose Sanders, a powerful civil rights attorney and the founder of the NVRMI. She led us in movement songs as we crossed the bridge to a park that honors fallen activists, where she shared her vision of the park as a gathering place for youth working for social change today. Kelly, a white student, wrote about sharing that experience with her classmates: “I really didn’t think the walk across the bridge would make me feel the way it did—however, as I started marching up the bridge, singing, with both Blacks and whites, I felt a happy sensation run through my body. It was like I wanted to cry, but I wanted to be brave and strong. So as I marched across the bridge, I stood tall and remembered that I truly was marching in the footsteps of my history, our history.” This experience would likely not have stirred as compelling feelings for her had she simply been a tourist in Selma crossing the bridge on her own. As a shared experience, however, it reverberated with significance.
These connections were further solidified during a dinner Rose, Afriye, and others from the museum threw for us later that night. Joanne’s sister Linda, another marcher, joined us as well and shared her stories. Our students listened enraptured as Rose and Linda exchanged philosophies on change, strategy, tactics, and the state of the world today. Rose took to the piano and everyone began singing and dancing along with others they had met that week. It was a celebration of the relationships they had developed with each other and those we had met over the span of the week. KC’s journal entry that night concluded: “I haven’t felt that close to people in a long time.”

Transformative Potential

Ultimately, the trip was a transformative experience—not only changing the knowledge students held or their ability to comprehend complex course concepts, but also altering something deep within them. The trip not only left lasting lessons, it also offered them new lenses with which to understand their social worlds. From my own disciplinary background, I am able to see this in part as the spark of their sociological imaginations, their capacity, as C. Wright Mills put it, “to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two,” grasping the intersection of history and their own biographies (7).

But it was more than this as well. It moved them to action, inspiring them to make concrete changes in how they lived their lives. Destiny wrote that the trip made her “realize the connection [she has] with every person who fought to make today a better tomorrow” and that she herself had a responsibility to work towards change, adding, “it will soon be my turn to leave my mark upon the earth.”

Alisa was also moved to change her future actions. During the drive back to North Carolina, Peter nudged me as we heard her on her cell phone asking a family member if they vote, earnestly urging them of the importance of doing so. In her journal she wrote: “I feel now that it is very important to vote. And I know I’m going to vote each and every time I can because at one time Blacks couldn’t and if they tried they were beaten.” Ebony began a poem penned in her journal towards the end of the trip: “What do I feel? A raw, unveiled monster of emotions suppressed and surreal. Eyes opened, yet not a surprise. Always saw what I seen today, but now with different eyes.” KC put it succinctly: “For the rest of my life I will have a different outlook all due to this one week.”

Reflection

Travel is a powerful pedagogical tool for critical and feminist teachers, as it leads to learning that is uniquely interactive, collective, and transformative. It places students in immersive contact with real-world realities, which we strive to help them see, come to terms with, and connect to the positionality of their own lived experiences. This reflective pedagogy is firmly rooted in the traditions of Paulo Freire and bell hooks, who urge teachers to acknowledge their students’ selves as a valuable resource in the learning process and to bring their own selves into that process as well.

I had little choice but to do so. As Joanne frequently introduced me to others as a former Wisconsin student who, years later, was bringing my own students to Selma to
continue “passing it on,” my students were keenly aware of my own stake in their learning. I was also able to use my own social location to model the reflective critical consciousness I encouraged in them.

When I was a young white girl growing up in the still-suburban lower-middle class neighborhoods between Minneapolis and St. Paul during the early 1980s, my father—on a few special occasions—bought me a milkshake at Snuffy’s Malt Shop on the way home from school. I still remember the thrill of climbing up on those bright shiny stools with the squishy red tops, letting my pale legs dangle freely as I sucked cool, creamy chocolate heaven through a straw.

Ms. Bland experienced a very different reality, just two decades before mine. She told the students how she used to pass the local ice cream parlor and gaze wistfully at the little boys and girls spinning gleefully on those same seductive stools inside. Her grandmother explained to her, however, that only white children could take seats at the counter. She never did get her chance to spin on one of those stools, as the parlor eventually chose to shut down rather than to integrate.

My ability to draw this contrast for students allowed me to bring myself into the course as an additional resource and to model the critical thinking I sought to foster in them. This was not only a pedagogical choice, it was also inevitable. When we travel with our students and they see us in our pajamas and our glasses, watch us eat fast food at rest stops, or catch us before we shower after a midday run, we become real people to them in ways that we do not in our classrooms and offices. Feminist pedagogical praxis urges us not to shy from, but to embrace this fact. Along the way, our students become three-dimensional people to us as well. People who are important to us and to others we have come to care about as well. While some may see this blurring of boundaries as a liability, I would argue that it can be an asset to the learning process as well, one that must be carefully respected, but that reflects education in a more authentic and grounded form.

Getting students off campus and out of their comfort zones pushes them to develop the eyes, ears, hearts, and minds they need to critically train on their own lives and communities in order to equip them with the understanding and motivation required to begin their own fights for progressive social change. It forces them to bring their selves to the learning process, and confront the complex selves of others. By turning an antebellum hotel balcony, the steps of a small church, a housing project, our motel rooms, and even a cramped van into make-shift classrooms, we were able to help students grasp the roots and meanings of inequality in the U.S., deepen their own group identities, and consider their potential as agents of social change. This critical feminist teacher could hope for little more.

Acknowledgment

I offer heartfelt thanks to Peter Green for bravely joining me in this endeavor. I also thank the Barton College professional development committee for the funding that made this course possible, Joanne Bland for her commitment and inspiration, and the students who participated for their passion, curiosity, and willingness to share their deeply personal reflections. Finally, I am grateful to Steve Kantrowitz, Tim Tyson, and Craig Werner for offering me the opportunity a decade ago that would ultimately allow me to share
this form of collective learning with my own students. I hope to have done them proud. Please direct correspondence to the author at MS 071, Waltham, MA 02454; email: amg@brandeis.edu.

Resources

For more information about the University of Wisconsin’s “Freedom Ride,” visit <http://www.news.wisc.edu/freedom>. For more information about Brandeis’s “Possibilities for Change in American Communities,” visit <http://www.brandeis.edu/departments/sociology/bus>. For more information about the trip described in this paper, visit <http://web.mac.com/sociologizing/Home/Journey_to_Selma.html>.

REFERENCES


