

Chapter 11

On Promoting Social Justice in the Privileged and Multilingual Study Abroad Context

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the multilingual and multicultural classroom in the privileged context of study abroad. In such an international classroom, exchange students from diverse academic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds meet and interact for a limited period of time. However, too often, the interplay between privilege and responsibility is not adequately addressed, and the study abroad context misses the chance of educational justice-oriented work. The purpose of this chapter is to link social justice education with intercultural communicative competence as well as with culturally and emotionally responsive teaching practices.

INTRODUCTION

The multifaceted complexities of our increasingly uncertain and endangered world call for higher education graduates, preferably multilingual ones, with an understanding of global ethics based on principles of equity, diversity, inclusivity and social justice. In order for higher education institutions across the globe to provide meaningful as well as challenging multilingual experiences, it is of utmost importance that the university experience is underpinned by values that are culturally and emotionally responsive (Seidl, 2021a), inclusive and socially just (Rubio-Alcalá & Coyle, 2021). At the same time, learning and teaching approaches in tertiary education that pursue epistemic justice and strive for decolonizing language education have the potential to be pedagogic encounters which critically engage with “contemporary ideas of multilingualism and the very notion of language itself” (Stroud & Kerfoot, 2020, p. 3).

From the perspective of a practitioner-researcher the author will explore ways of teaching international exchange students in the privileged and multilingual study abroad context, underpinned by principles

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of social-justice-based language education. If Valcke et al. (2021) remind us of the temporality of the student status, of the fact that these young adults are in a dynamic and intense state of becoming and we, as educators, have the privilege to cross their paths and provide them with challenging content, this is even more true in the context of study abroad. Even if we cross paths with exchange students for only the short span of time over the course of one semester, it is possible to live up to the values of transformative higher education pedagogies. Kreber (2016) describes these as pedagogies that nurture authenticity, civic-mindedness, democracy and social justice, in students and teachers alike. Of course, teaching language and teaching about language, not only as a linguistic system, but “as a means of communication, participation and becoming within complex contextual layers of cultural, social, political, ideological, global and local considerations” (Badwan, 2021, p. 206) is by no means an easy task.

Against this backdrop, the objective of this chapter is to explore the interplay between privilege and responsibility in the context of study abroad and educational justice-oriented work. To this end, the link between social justice education with intercultural communicative competence as well as with culturally and emotionally responsive teaching practices will be discussed in the background section. Then the methodology of a small-scale questionnaire-based study with exchange students at an Austrian university will be presented in order to provide readers with insights into the student perspective on the topic under scrutiny. The findings of the study will be presented and then discussed in light of previous research on multilingualism in higher education that makes a case for students and teachers as co-participants (Li, 2020; Seidl, 2022). Finally, after addressing implications for pedagogy the chapter closes with some suggestions for further research and concluding thoughts.

BACKGROUND

Whether young adults study exclusively at their home university or partly abroad has been discussed as having a significant impact on students’ cultural and democratic literacy (Seidl, 2020, 2021b). For example, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is commonly considered to be a desired outcome of the experience of a study sojourn abroad. In this regard, Randolph and Johnson (2017) stress the fact that ICC links social justice education most directly with the goal of language competence since ICC focuses on “linking communication and culture in meaningful and critical ways” (p. 104) while concurrently requiring students “to see the world in new ways, decentering their own experiences and taking up the perspective of the interlocutor” (p. 106). Given that intercultural education is never a neutral practice, but always based on assumptions, onto-epistemological, normative and political commitments (Witte & Harden, 2021) it is the right of every student, as Papadopoulos (2017, p. 82) puts it, to receive an education that enables them “to make a difference in the world” and find “ways to address conflict and help people live with others in a peaceful world”. Knowing how to address and resolve different types of conflicts means, for example, knowing how to deal with diversity and inequalities in socially just and peace-building ways (Wei & Zhou, 2021). When it comes to engagement with diversity, Witte and Harden (2021, p. 6) ask how such a demeanor can be fostered “in a privileged social space (e.g. classroom, private school, university) that is closed to many people”.

To address this question, the author of this chapter argues that in order to promote social justice in the privileged and multilingual context of study abroad, in the above mentioned question, posed by Witte and Harden (2021, p. 6) we could replace ‘engagement with diversity’ by ‘engagement with social justice’. If we conceive of access to higher education as an “unequally distributed social good, the least we must

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