

Transforming Students through Integrative and Transformative Learning in a Field-Based Experience

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Abstract

Projects that consider integrative and transformative learning theories challenge students to consider their own biases and their place in a larger community. A project such as this has the potential to increase a student's civic mindedness as they are taken to places outside of their comfort zone. This project and study involved twenty-one freshman, sophomore and junior-level students from a video production course at an urban Midwestern university. The project design was posited in integrative and transformative learning theory and followed the Intercultural Competence model as students created a documentary interviewing individuals incarcerated in multiple prison systems. The purpose of doing so was to increase the students' awareness of an unfamiliar and oftentimes intimidating environment, providing them with a unique learning experience where they could develop their skills in video production and intercultural awareness.

Keywords: transformative learning, experiential learning, civic engagement, video production

Transforming Students through Integrative and Transformative Learning in a Field-Based Experience

Students do not learn in a silo of discipline-based knowledge. The environment in which the student learns can inform their way of thinking and challenge their frame of reference. As higher education continues to face challenges, it is imperative to consider development of the student holistically as they are presented with course material and engage with given projects. Employers are not only seeking graduates with content knowledge but also soft skills. Hart Research Associates (2015) found that 91% of employers say that critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving abilities are more important than a potential employee's undergraduate major. It is valuable for a student to learn how to communicate, listen, and adapt as one works with those of other points of view in a society that faces multiple issues. "Real learning means that the student must be prepared to change and to risk having his or her prejudices, priorities, habits and values altered" (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2013). Students need the opportunity to work within a diverse environment and adapt within that environment. In a university setting, students may interact with others but may not have the opportunity to face issues such as poverty, social injustice, or the justice system.

What if instructors who teach courses such as video production, film, or art saw their projects as a vehicle for integrative and transformative learning that teach the technical and creative skills of the discipline but may also create opportunities that challenge a students' frames of reference and allow them the opportunity to see themselves as citizens in a larger community? Video production courses are integral to a student's career as they enter the fields of media, art, design, film, marketing, documentary creation, and journalism (as well as others). Many different skills go into the process of creating a quality production. This includes audio, lighting, camera operation, editing, and also client communication, respect, presentation, and teamwork. Thus, each student must learn more than just the technological and creative skills needed to produce media. Part of replicating the working

environment should include incorporating a diverse environment that provides each of the students the opportunity to work with others unlike themselves by exposing each in the class to various cultures, races, and ways of thinking as a part of the course. This can be done by taking them to places outside of the institution. While students may have an experience such as this within a social justice course or cultural studies course, they may not in a video production or art education course.

Background

As a newer faculty member in a new city, it is valuable to network with others both inside and outside of the institution. Through a casual event for new faculty, I met the director of the Solution Center at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). The Solution Center is a community engagement office charged with managing relationships with the university and city. Through conversations with the director a partnership with the Indiana Department of Corrections and their industrial organization titled PEN Industries was formed.

PEN Industries produces multiple items such as license plates, office furniture, and clothing. The organization develops business-to-business relations in order to create these products and provide work for the incarcerated individuals at each prison facility within the state. The purpose is to equip offenders for successful re-entry by providing meaningful work and career development opportunities. PEN Industries needed a marketing video to create awareness to the general public and to other potential business partners. By increasing their reach PEN Industries hoped to manufacture more products and provide more inmates the opportunity to work which could lead to greater restitution of existing inmates.

The objective for each student in the class was to participate in an authentic learning experience where they could develop technical and creative skill but also gain opportunity to have their biases and view of themselves in society challenged. Through initial surveying of the students it was realized that many of these students had little to no experience outside of the state of Indiana and many were from rural farming-based towns. Before the project started each student answered survey questions related to their comfort level. Students were also asked whether the instructor should have any concerns about each of them entering a prison. If a student had any ties to an individual in the prison system it could cause anxiety for the student. Additionally, many of the students had never picked up a camera prior to this course and were fairly new to video production.

Literature Review

The Need for Integrative Learning

Integrative learning is learning that takes place when a student can make connections to previously learned experiences to inform new experiences. For a college student this type of learning can take place in many forms.

1. Students can blend knowledge from previously learned skills to help create something new (such as a signature work).
2. A student can put theory into practice (such as a clinical experience).
3. Students can consider the perspective of multiple individuals when solving a problem. This can be done within a team-based environment or as an individual.
4. Students can adapt a skill they have learned from one situation into another.
5. Students may be asked to reflect on connections that have been made over time between curriculum and co-curricular opportunities.
6. Students may be placed in an interdisciplinary setting where they are interacting with students from various programs. (American Associate of Colleges & Universities, n.d.)

When developing an experiential (or field-based) experience multiple factors may come into play outside of the discipline-based skills needed to complete a project. Integrative learning allows the instructor to consider these soft skills (such as communication, teamwork, intercultural skills) and

factor those components into assessment and the holistic learning of the individual. Students within this project were asked to put theory into practice within a very short time period. Students received lectures, were given lab assignments, and also reviewed tutorials given by the instructor. Much of this curriculum was given during the first project. The second project (where the students created the PEN Industries video) students were given some instruction but they were treated as professionals already in the field as they participated in the video shoots at each of the prisons.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning is the process of changing an adult learner's frame of reference such as their assumptions through which they understand a certain experience (Mezirow, 1997). Originally developed by Mezirow (1978), transformative learning theory posits that adults have a strong tendency to reject ideas that are outside of a person's preconceptions. Those items are then rejected and labeled as unworthy or irrelevant (Mezirow, 1997). By having students participate in situations that challenge these preconceptions, such as a traumatic situation, the goal is to transform the learners' frames of reference into something that is more inclusive. This is done so by creating opportunities for self-reflection. According to Williamson (2017), "Transformative learning theory explores the kinds of changes that result from processes of examining, questioning and revising perception. Things previously unconsidered or unexamined are questioned and looked at in a new way through critical dialogue and critical reflection and this may lead to transformation" (p. 3). Since its inception in 1978, transformative learning theory has become one of the most developed theories in adult education (Kappel & Daley, 2004). Various studies have explored how educators can utilize transformative learning theory both inside and outside of the classroom, allowing students to act on new insights from various experiences (Taylor, 2017).

"Art-based courses have been acknowledged for their importance in the role of stimulating, fostering and supporting transformative learning" (Cranton & Hoggan, 2012). In an exploration of how the arts can promote transformative learning in adult education contexts, Lawrence (2012) found that if the art itself is evocative or provocative, it has the potential to facilitate transformation. The creation of art for public works allows the transformation by the student to take place, not just because of the work being done, but also the context of that work such as creation of a documentary within a prison system. Students were all from Indiana and grew up in a rural or suburban environment. None of them had interactions with incarcerated individuals previous to the project and each of them were asked to state their preconceived notions (or assumptions) of incarcerated individuals. After the project students were asked to state if their assumptions had changed having worked in the prison system.

Growing Intercultural Skills

In order to understand the implications for fostering intercultural skills, research on the value of including diversity-rich components was conducted. It was noted that many students often volunteer for individual activities but that there is often a disconnect between their volunteer activities and academic pursuits. Universities recognize that this type of exposure is not enough. According to Farrell (2006), "Students do not learn enough about how they can become responsible and engaged lifelong citizens" (p. 1). Instructors need to consider infusing intercultural development into their curriculum. Doing so can allow students the opportunity to develop a greater social awareness and help the students develop as workers in a society.

Schwartzman (2001) offered the purpose for civically-based activities "as a mechanism for raising consciousness and creating a 'heightened social awareness' and instills a sense of caring for others in an education system that tends to equate learning with individual effort" (p. 423). Students who completed the PEN Industries project had the opportunity to engage directly with those who are in the prison system and get a sense of what life was like for each individual. They were also able to see how mechanisms such as industrial work can help those in the prison system leave the system.

Not only does including a diversity component confront students with their own prejudice, but it also aides in their development as a worker of society. Swenson-Lepper (2012) stated, "The workforce in the United States is becoming more diverse and over the next century it is expected to

reach a point where Caucasians are in the minority” (p. 1). Educational institutions must reinforce the value of creating experiences that promote diversity education. Yeates, McVeigh, & Van Hemert (2011) stated:

Ideally, the significant outcomes of any pedagogical strategy framed within an ‘internationalized curriculum’ (limited though the term may be) would be the development and refinement of ‘transcultural’ skills and competencies, which all students will take with them beyond the academy (p. 73).

Exposing students to service or civic-based projects replaces a fabricated scenario with a real-world project. Moreover, it places the student into a diverse situation to which they may not normally be exposed. This helps the student develop the transcultural skills and competencies that Yeates discusses.

When designing curriculum that supports intercultural development, instructors should structure purposeful interactions that give each student the opportunity to confront previously held knowledge with complicating human realities (Lee, Williams, Shaw, & Jie, 2014). Students that participated in the PEN Industries project visited three prisons (one in the city and two outside of the city). Not only did they face the struggle of utilizing new-found skills to develop a marketing-related video, but they also had to face other social issues such as the state of the judicial system and the purpose for incarceration.

Whether it be a project for one student or an entire class, Schwartzman (2001) argues that service-learning projects should engage participants in three levels of relationships that integrate the student, the community, and the academy. The value of a civic partnership should be measured against its benefit for the student, the institution and the community at large. The PEN Industries project integrated the student work with the community partner and also involved others at the institution (such as the Solution Center) and faculty who offered expertise in visiting the prison system.

Faculty who desire to include intercultural development in their course curriculum should also consider opportunities to network with others at their own institution. Many institutions offer service learning offices or other offices that have direct contact with the community and can provide opportunities for faculty to engage their students with outside organizations and civic entities.

A Model for Intercultural Competence

Partnering with a civic organization while focusing on a student’s values, ideals, and views can challenge the students to engage civically. With this in mind, the Process Model of Intercultural Competence was utilized to guide the students through the experience (Figure 1).

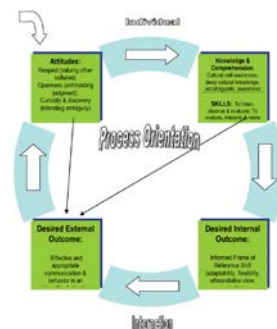


Figure 1. Process Model of Intercultural Competence.

Developed by Deardorff (2008), the Process Model of Intercultural Competence is an ongoing four-part cycle that involves attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, desired internal outcomes and desired external outcomes. Attitudes are comprised of respect (or valuing other cultures), openness (withholding judgment), and curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity). Knowledge and comprehension involves cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, and social

linguistic awareness. Skills that are developed in this stage are the ability to listen, observe, and evaluate. Desired internal outcomes are to shift students' frames of reference from ignorance to informed. Desired external outcomes are effective and appropriate communication and behavior (based on ones intercultural skills, knowledge and attitude). The student moves through each of the cycles as they are involved with the project. Students move from individual levels (attitudes, knowledge, and comprehension) to interaction (outcomes).

Students evaluated their own attitudes, beliefs and views on incarcerated individuals during the provided pre-survey. Students attended a presentation with a faculty member who conducts research and takes students to multiple prison systems. It was through this presentation they gained a greater understanding of the expectations of being in a prison and how to operate while there. Students also gained an understanding of the types of people who are incarcerated. As students entered each of the prison systems they gained new knowledge and challenged their own views (internal incomes). They then finished each experience by interviewing incarcerated individuals (external outcomes). Students finished the experience by participating in a post-survey.

Methodology

The Computer Graphics Technology (CGT) video production course was made up of one freshman and twenty sophomores and juniors. All students were Caucasian with the exception of two. The students were all in the age range of 18-22 years old. Many of the students grew up within the greater city of Indianapolis and had little exposure outside of the general city area which is rural and farm country. The students were presented with two project options for their second assignment of the eight-week course. The prison project video was one option while creating a video montage was another. While each project had a different process and outcome, the rubrics for grading the assignments were the same. Students were graded on the criteria of shot selection, pace, mood, storyline, utilization of text, utilization of keyframe animation techniques, and flow. Institutional Research Board approval was obtained for this study.

The concept for the prison video was presented to the students during an hour-long discussion with a representative from the department of corrections for the state. Students involved with the project were also given another presentation by a professor in Criminal Justice which provided an opportunity for students to understand the experience of being in a prison and how they should operate while visiting. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions about what it would be like to go into a prison and what they needed to prepare for. At the completion of both presentations each student was given the opportunity to choose the montage project or the prison project.

Being that this was the second project of the semester each student had some exposure to the video production process. The first project of the course was for each student to create a commercial. To allow each student to build on these skills students were asked to individually create a treatment, script and storyboard based on their perception of the finished video. While the content of the video was known (specifically interviews of the incarcerated individuals and b-roll footage of each facility) the structure of the video was open to interpretation. Each student chose which of the three prison shoots to attend. The instructor participated in all three shoots.

Survey Instrument

A pre and post survey was developed in partnership with the Office of Service-Learning at IUPUI. The purpose of the survey was to provide an opportunity for students to reflect on their experience before entering a prison and also after the experience of conducting a video shoot and interview (with incarcerated individuals). The pre-survey was disseminated before the production (video shoot) process started. The post-survey took place at the completion of the project. Questions were asked related to emotional state and their views of incarcerated individuals. Due to the fact that the group that completed the project was N=7, quantitative data was invalid. The qualitative survey questions are as follows:

Pre-Survey

What are the primary emotions that you are feeling in considering the possibility of visiting a prison and participating in a video production at that location?

What are your views/opinions of incarcerated individuals?

What are your views/opinions of incarcerated individuals who are making attempts at rehabilitation?

Post-Survey

What are the primary emotions that you are feeling having attended and participated in this project within a prison?

What are your views/opinions of incarcerated individuals now that you have completed this project?

What are your views/opinions of incarcerated individuals who are making attempts at rehabilitation now that you have completed this project?

Student Experience

The first prison visit was to a manufacturing facility on the grounds of a prison yard. Upon entering the gates of the facility, the camera and microphones were evaluated by security and individuals went through a basic security procedure and pat down by prison guards. Once entering the prison, the students were given a general tour of the facility. The tour led to the manufacturing floor where a few hundred incarcerated individuals sorted hygiene and food-based products for other prison facilities. Each of the students took a camera. One student chose to obtain b-roll of the shipping and loading procedure while another went on a platform to obtain wide shots of the facility. A prison employee was on-site to offer any support but students were given the opportunity to move throughout the space to take the footage that was needed. Each of the two students then conducted interviews with five different inmates. The inmates ranged in age from early twenties to late fifties and were selected by management of the facility for interview.

The second visit was considered a location with higher security measures. Two of the students and the instructor, along with the organization employee, travelled one-hour north of campus by car. After going through a pat down and a security process that was similar to that of an airport system, two students and the instructor were escorted through the prison yard to the facility. At that time, the prison yard had been cleared to avoid contact with inmates as this was a maximum-security prison. Each student took a camera and obtained b-roll footage of inmates conducting their specific jobs on the manufacturing floor as a tour of the facility was given. The students were able to get close to the inmates with the camera and were just asked to avoid any major equipment (i.e. forklifts). Both security and staff of the prison were present. No interview footage was obtained at this facility.

The last facility was considered to be the most similar to an office setting. Inmates dressed in business casual attire. Five students participated. Students were given an initial tour and were then allowed to obtain footage around the office facility. Students were allowed to roam freely as they collected footage of workers at desks and on phones or working on projects. At the completion of the b-roll shoot, all students gathered in one area to conduct interviews of five inmates who were chosen by the management of the organization.

All inmates who were interviewed were male and of varying race. Some came from more crime-ridden areas and backgrounds while others were white-collar workers. The following questions were developed in partnership between the instructor, the students, and PEN Products prior to the video shoots:

What type of work are you doing with PEN Products?

What is your experience like working at PEN Products?

What has PEN done for you?
How has PEN prepared you for your release?
What skills have you learned here?

The students conducted all of the interviews (at the first and third location). One student operated the camera while another student asked each of the questions. While the questions did not directly ask about their individual backgrounds, the individuals questioned did discuss how they got there and what led them into the prison system. The instructor and prison employee were onsite for all interviews as well.

Results& Discussion

All students were asked questions both before and after the experience (from meeting with the prison employee for the first time to the final editing of the video). The two primary questions related to their emotional state and their views of incarcerated individuals were noted. The following are the results and discussion on both of those questions.

Emotional State

The qualitative responses and the observations of each prison visit provided interesting insights. Students were asked on the pre-experience survey to describe their emotional state as they thought about going into a prison. Students responded with the following:

- “I find it interesting, I actually decided this project because I was intrigued by the chance to visit and see how life is inside of a prison.”
- “I am a little nervous of how I will be treated by the people who are incarnated but anxious to start.”
- “I am excited to see how these people's lives have changed.”
- “I am excited to participate in the video. I'm slightly nervous to be working with the incarcerated individuals but I know we will be safe.”
- “The primary emotions that I feel are that of interest and curious to see how these facilities are run and how they rehabilitate these offenders.”

Students were asked how their emotional state had changed after the visit. Students responded with the following:

- “I feel that it was an overall good, enriching experience and feel that I am glad that I participated in this project. I also feel that I have a better understanding of those who are incarcerated and feel that they can become good people again.”
- “I feel like there was no reason to be worried or nervous like I was before going.”
- “I was nervous going in but excited to see what it would be like. I'm very happy with my experience, the PEN workers were nice and for the most part accepting of us being there. I really enjoyed my time with them.”

Discussion on Emotional State

The two primary emotions felt before the prison visits were that of nervousness and also curiosity. The primary responses after the visits were related to relief or a feeling that it was different than what they expected and that their nerves were put at ease. As students began their experience and prepared to go into the prison system, they were unaware of what the situation would be like. Often our only exposure to the prison system is by watching the news and seeing an individual mugshot or arrest. The students do not get a full understanding of the individual person who is incarcerated but merely hear of their crime. As students interacted with those in the prison system (whether it be workers or those incarcerated) they gained a better understanding of what the individuals and the

environment was like. Their emotional state changed from one that was focused on a lack of understanding to greater understanding and empathy.

Views on Incarcerated

The qualitative responses and the observations of each prison visit provided interesting insights. Students were initially asked on the pre-experience survey to discuss their opinion of those unlike themselves and incarcerated individuals who were involved with an industrial prison program.

Students responded with the following:

- “Some are bad some are good, just because they are on the inside doesn't mean they created a major felony, sometimes it was a simple mistake.”
- “I don't have any sort of opinion on them as a group, I feel that my opinions would develop after meeting them individually or hearing their story.”
- “I think that it shows that they are ready to change and are trying to do better and turn their lives around.”
- “I think they are doing the right thing and have some respect for these individuals for taking these steps in order to become good again and want to prosper in life.”

At the completion of the experience, students were asked how their perceptions had changed.

Students responded with the following.

- “I feel that it was an overall good enriching experience and feel that I am glad that I participated in this project. I also feel that I have a better understanding of those who are incarcerated and feel that they can become good people again.”
- “I feel like there was no reason to be worried or nervous like I was before going. I was nervous going in but excited to see what it would be like. I'm very happy with my experience, the workers were nice and for the most part accepting of us being there. I really enjoyed my time with them.”
- “I have a much better opinion of them now. I hate to admit but before actually meeting with them and learning of the program I had a negative attitude toward incarcerated individuals and judged them without realizing it. After this experience I feel that I've become more accepting toward them and realize that you can't judge someone off of a bad decision in their past.”
- “I believe that the second chances that we are giving them are a good idea and not all prisoners are all bad, but just make stupid mistakes. I don't think that my opinion has changed much.”
- “I have a lot more respect for the program and the people participating in it. I think that before I was hesitant whether or not they could really change but now that I have seen the soon to be released people in the program, I've changed my mind and it definitely made me respect them more.”

Discussion on Views of Incarcerated

Students indicated they were indifferent to their views on incarcerated individuals when taking the survey before the project began. It wasn't until after the project finished that students indicated they were nervous and that their opinions had changed. My observations as the instructor validated that the students were more at ease as the experience continued. The students' confidence increased as the interviews were conducted and b-roll was shot at each location. Each of the students appeared somewhat timid at the start of the site visits. During the visit, each of the students took a level of initiative when asked to set up for interviews and obtain b-roll footage.

Instructional Notes

As the instructor, I had my own hesitations that were predicated by three concerns. Being a newer faculty member at the institution, the students were unaware of my teaching style or of me as

an individual. It was overbearing to have an initial introduction and then present the students with the possibility of conducting an authentic project in a prison system. The second concern was that students had never been exposed to the subject of video production before. For many they had never picked up a camera. The class is elective so most of them may never choose video production to be a part of their career path. The third concern was the makeup of the students. Most of them are primarily from the Indianapolis area and live with their families. Thus, the idea of going into a prison system would be something they may have never had any experience doing before. Each of these concerns became the very reason for having the students participate in the project. Students could build their intercultural skills by gaining exposure to a prison system and meeting individuals from varying backgrounds. They could also practice a skill they had never learned before (video production) which would foster integrative learning. Students could also have their assumptions challenged which could transform their learning.

I noticed that the students moved from a state of timidity to one that was relaxed and showed a desire to take ownership over the project. Students also felt great freedom and ownership of the project as they obtained b-roll during the third prison visit. Based on the responses that were received but also on my own observations, I found that the students' eyes were opened to what it was like to work with individuals unlike themselves. Both the students' emotional states and views toward incarcerated individuals changed from one of being nervous and lacking of understanding to one of empathy.

The presentations before the project were beneficial. The presentation from the PEN Industries employee was valuable but I would also consider including a presentation that discussed the diverse working environment that is media production. By offering a presentation such as this, I can provide a greater justification for developing intercultural skills and the need for working in a diverse environment. This would be difficult to obtain but may present valuable. This could possibly increase the opportunity for meeting the goals I had outlined for the project. Bringing the professor in from criminal justice was also greatly beneficial as it gave students a greater sense of what to expect when entering the prison system. I would also consider more opportunities to reflect on their experience in the prison, different modes of reflection (i.e. Video reflection and written) and a shorter gap in time from experience to reflection.

Those who teach in liberal arts (such as video production) have been including projects with outside clients for many years. Some specifically work with not-for-profit organizations or government entities. But I think we often fail to understand the value of why we include these projects other than to allow students the opportunity to work with outside clients. This project focused on the students' interaction with an outside client but specifically placed value on working in a diverse environment that a student would typically not go.

Conclusion

As an instructor, it is invaluable to focus on the discipline-base skills needed to obtain a job. But the need to integrate all types of skills (specifically intercultural skills) is crucial. Students need to understand how to communicate, how to solve problems from various perspectives, and how to work in a diverse environment where multiple people from varying backgrounds can work together. Courses such as video production need to consider more than just including experiential components within the curriculum but how those experiences can better shape their own students into becoming engaged citizens. Students also need their biases and frames of reference challenged through transformative experiences that cause them to reflect on why they believe what they believe. The adoption of integrative learning with a focus on integrative skill development allows students the opportunity to have their own prejudices challenged and can produce the intended outcome a four-year institution hopes to obtain. As well, universities need to consider the use of art, design and media production courses as another opportunity to partner with a community organization that can provide an opportunity for the students, the organization and the university.

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