

Student Identities and the Tourist Gaze in International Service-learning: A University Project in Belize

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Introduction

Service-learning has been used as a means of teaching and learning across many U.S. universities. Within many settings, service-learning has been designed as a tool to teach intricate concepts and ideas, while in others it has been used to engage students in communities. In many universities, service-learning is the primary means through which students are involved in outreach and engagement, providing an opportunity for students to interact with people in local or distant communities. Service-learning provides a setting for learning outside the classroom, while adding a sense of “community context” to students’ education and connecting coursework to the real world. Through purposefully planned activities and structured reflection, students are challenged to become active citizens, not only in their own community and nation, but in the world. International service-learning (ISL) courses seek to develop students’ sense of global citizenship by immersing them in situations that involve interacting with community residents while carrying out a project intended to benefit the community. The goals of ISL thus assume that students should see and conduct themselves as something other than tourists. In practice, however, students may adopt a range of identities and ways of seeing and relating to community partners and other citizens of the host country.

The purpose of this article is to examine how 11 students enrolled in a U.S. service-learning course in an international setting understood and represented their identities during their project and, in particular, their use of *tourist* as a “rhetorical apparatus” (McCabe, 2005) to make sense of their experiences. We explore how students positioned themselves in relation to tourists and rejected this label for themselves, the ways in which they both exhibited and departed from the “tourist gaze” (Urry, 1990/2002), and the conditions that fostered a more or less tourist-like stance: specifically, hotel accommodations in a tourist town and home stays in a remote village, respectively. We argue that the tourist gaze counteracts core goals of ISL and university engagement; however, such projects can

also provide students with opportunities to develop more nuanced, self-conscious perspectives of Third World citizens and themselves. The findings illuminate how students who visit developing countries adopt and contest particular identities—in this case, that of the tourist. Although students in international service-learning and engagement projects may be perceived by community residents, or may perceive themselves, as tourists, education research has not sufficiently examined how students interpret their activities in relation to tourism. Thus, our study provides insights into the ways that students make meaning of and represent their interactions with people during international education experiences.

Literature Review

International Service-Learning and Higher Education

Service-learning is defined as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful service with instruction and reflection. The integrated format of service and learning has created a culture of transformative learning for many students in higher education (Boyte, 2008; O'Connor, 2006). At their best, service-learning experiences provide university students with a number of social outcomes, increased civic awareness, and academic competencies, along with the opportunity for outreach and engagement within the university and greater community (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Washburn, Weingart-Laskowitz, & Summers, 2004). While many of these experiences take place within communities across America, a growing number of service-learning programs take place in international locations (Silcox & Leek, 1997; Yates & Youniss, 1999).

International service-learning programs have blossomed as integral components of academic curricula within a number of higher education institutions. In some cases, these programs are housed within civic engagement or service-learning-related centers or integrated into study abroad programs. Regardless of where the program is housed, well-planned programs have the basic tenets of service-learning: they are connected to academic content, reciprocal in nature, and integrate critical reflection. In addition to being grounded in service-learning, many of these programs have goals that extend beyond academics and civic engagement. Many ISL programs have the ability to enhance cultural understanding, build cultural competencies, and increase intercultural communication (Berry & Chisholm, 1999; Chisholm & Berry, 2002). By connecting or integrating students with a given community, ISL programs can maximize the effectiveness of service-learning more broadly.

Furthermore, ISL programs have been shown to foster a sense of multicultural and intercultural education between students and the community (Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004). In essence, these programs can create a cadre of globally connected and engaged citizens. The ability of students to live in a global society will require more programs in which students are exposed to and integrated into various cultures. International service-learning programs have the ability to serve as catalysts for broadening the learning experience for students, in both the United States and other nations. More important, these experiences can assist in shaping student attitudes toward global citizenship: that is, a sense of connection to and responsibility for the well-being of people in other nations.

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Research on service-learning and study abroad has begun to pay more attention to what and how students learn about themselves and others, particularly when interacting with people whose identity and life situation differ from their own. For example, a growing body of research examines how students develop a sense of global citizenship (e.g., Dower & Williams, 2002; Osler & Vincent, 2002). By stepping outside their national borders, students may become more aware of how they and people abroad view their home nation, an awareness that can reinforce or erode their identification with ideological features of American identity. Similarly, research on short-term ISL projects suggests that they can lead students to question, for example, American “cultural hegemony,” consumerism, foreign policy, and cultural norms (Kiely, 2004), and to ponder issues of privilege and injustice (King, 2004; see also Rhoads & Neururer, 1998).

Service-learning, however, does not always alter student perspectives, especially in short-term projects (Clayton-Pedersen, Stephens, & Kean, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1997, pp. 67-69). It can also reproduce hierarchical power relations between students and community residents (Camacho, 2004; Ver Beek, 2002); reinforce stereotypes of the poor (Hollis, 2004); or perpetuate distorted, simplistic understandings of social problems (Ver Beek, 2002). For instance, Camacho (2004) found that some university students who interacted with Mexican migrant workers “constructed them as objects of their gazes” (p. 37), much as a tourist would, and became more

aware of their own foreignness. Camacho concluded that students need “a sustained experience, with conscientious reflection, to be able to move beyond the ‘tourist gaze’” (p. 41).

Tourism and the Tourist Gaze

We briefly discuss here insights from the tourist studies literature that informed our analysis. Cohen (1974) posits that a tourist is a temporary, voluntary traveler on a nonrecurrent, noninstrumental round trip that lasts a relatively long time. According to this definition, students in this case lacked one important criterion: The trip was not an end in itself but served educational and community service purposes. Urry’s (1990/2002) analysis of tourism illuminates other key differences between ISL students and tourists. Whereas tourism is a leisure activity involving the consumption of goods and services expected to generate pleasure (Urry, 1990/2002), ISL is not primarily a leisure activity, although it requires travel and usually includes some relaxation and sightseeing. In ISL, students receive academic credit for academic and service work, and their projects should result in the *creation* or *provision* of something useful to an organization or community, ideally through reciprocal relationships that incorporate stakeholders’ skills and knowledge. Finally, while students often find enjoyment in ISL projects, pleasure is not the ultimate aim. Often exposing students to stark poverty and involving them in physical labor can be demanding or unpleasant, whether physically, intellectually, spiritually, or emotionally (see Kiely, 2004).

We use the concept of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990/2002) to explore how students exhibited more or less tourist-like attitudes and actions. As a “socially organized” way of seeing and experiencing a given locale, the tourist gaze is guided by the anticipation of pleasure and directed toward objects such as an ethnic group, landscape, or cultural performance. There are multiple tourist gazes, each constructed vis-à-vis “non-tourist forms of social experience and consciousness” (Urry, 1990/2002, p. 1). Informed by media images, the gaze produces asymmetrical power relations by penetrating people’s lives (Maoz, 2006). In this way, tourist gazes “organize the encounters of visitors with the ‘other’” (Urry, 1990/2002, p. 145), leading tourists to notice separation, otherness, and difference, while often neglecting to see how places are intimately bound to other economies, nations, and peoples (Dolby, 2003). Bruner’s (1995) insight that “tourism thrives on differences” helps explain why tourists are often fascinated by “the exotic other” (p. 224).

The “search for authenticity” (Cohen, 1979, 1988; Greenwood, 1982; Jackson, 1999; MacCannell, 1973, 1999; McCabe, 2005), another hallmark of the tourist gaze, is especially relevant to this study. Typically, scholars view the search for authenticity as a product of the alienation engendered by modernity (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1999). To overcome this alienation, tourists are thought to search outside their own national and cultural borders for “the pristine, the primitive, the natural, that which is as yet untouched by modernity” (Cohen, 1988, p. 374). Many tourists, then, want to have a “deeper involvement” with the places and people they encounter (MacCannell, 1999). However, as some scholars (e.g., Cohen, 1988; McCabe, 2005; Urry, 1990/2002) have argued, not all tourists seek deep, “unstaged” cultural experiences (MacCannell, 1973) or yearn for pristine, primitive cultures. Rather, they may playfully enjoy and find meaning in activities others might deem superficial or contrived (Cohen, 1988; Urry, 1990/2002). The search for authenticity is relevant here because many students commented on exotic aspects of Belizean culture and expressed a desire to experience the “true culture” and to access the “back regions” (MacCannell, 1973) of village life. Moreover, as we will see, staying in a tourism-dominated locale shaped students’ interactions with local people.

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We draw on Urry’s (1990/2002) characterization of the tourist gaze rather than MacCannell’s (2001) more reflective, self-aware tourist because the former counteracts several key goals of ISL and university engagement: to subvert hierarchical power relations between universities and communities, to challenge students to develop a complex understanding of social problems and cultural practices, and to equip students to examine their role in enhancing or undermining the well-being of their own and other communities. In many ways, then, the tourist gaze contradicts what service-learning proponents (e.g., Camacho, 2004) envision as legitimate, desirable student identities, motivations, and interactions with community residents.

In this study, the pleasure-seeking, superficial tourist also emerged in students’ depictions of tourists and their rejection of this identity. Their attitudes reflect a prevalent antitourist stance, for people overwhelmingly portray tourists in a derogatory manner

actions such as shopping for trinkets, actions that may undermine the goals of ISL and university engagement.

However, staying in a tourist site also prompted unexpected learning about the effects of tourism. In interviews, discussion board comments, and a group reflection session, all four San Pedro students underscored what they learned about Belizeans' perceptions of tourism from their conversations with youth on the beach. This reflection, posted on the course website, encapsulates their new insights:

One major thing I learned by taking this course is what locals really think about tourists. We met a 14 year-old boy on the beach and we started talking to him. We asked him what he thought about tourists and his reply was, "People come here and leave their trash everywhere, and then go home. I guess their mothers never taught them any manners." When he said this, I was shocked that a 14 year-old boy had such strong feelings about tourists. For locals, tourism must be a love/hate relationship: they love the tourist's money, but hate the tourist's actions.

Similarly, another student wrote, "I never realized that . . . people felt the way they do about tourists." In response, a third student wrote, "[the boy's comment] that tourists come and trash the beach and leave . . . definitely hit me, too, and then when we went to Bacalar Chico and there was like a two-foot pile of garbage all along the shore. It will definitely make me be more careful with what I do when I visit other places." This serendipitous conversation and the trash that they later saw at a reef made a lasting impression on students, exposing the relationship between tourism, local livelihoods, and marine ecology. By understanding how some San Pedro residents perceived tourists, students began to see themselves from the other's perspective and to consider the consequences of their actions. In Maoz's (2006, p. 222) terms, they became more aware of the "local gaze" or "how 'they' see 'us.'" Moreover, as students traced the links between tourist actions and the well-being of the Belizean people and environment, they shifted from the disconnection that typifies a tourist gaze (Dolby, 2003).

Discussion and Implications

For all but two of the 11 students, this course was their first extended, albeit short-term, exposure to life in a nonindustrialized

and rarely want to self-identify as tourists when describing their travel (McCabe, 2005). In sum, “it appears to be morally unacceptable to position oneself as a ‘tourist,’ since ‘tourists’ are constructed as being responsible for many ills associated with global neoliberal politics such as cultural erosion, environmental degradation and gratuitous and passive mass consumption” (McCabe, 2005, p. 100).

In this article we treat students’ references to tourists as a “rhetorical apparatus”: an “ideological, moral and political construct used to achieve interactional goals” (McCabe, 2005, pp. 95, 96). This analytical focus emphasizes how research participants used *tourist* as a category to describe their activities and differentiate them from those of tourists (McCabe, 2005). The *tourist*, then, is a conceptual prism through which students make sense of their identities and ISL experiences. Significantly, the ways students use this concept can reproduce and/or challenge ideologically laden discourses about what it means to be a tourist—or student and citizen. Second, treating *tourist* as a discursive strategy suggests that interview responses depend “upon the context in which the respondents are asked to account for their behavior” (McCabe, 2005, p. 92). In the case of tourism, respondents “tend to play down the activities and experiences which might be deemed inappropriate or not fitting the way they want to project themselves as ‘good’ tourists to the interviewer” (p. 95). Thus, the interview setting and the interviewer-participant relationship structured how students described their roles, activities, and identities. In short, the nature of the interview as a communicative event (see Briggs, 1986), coupled with pervasive antitourist attitudes, likely predisposed students to portray themselves as nontourists.

The Belize Field Research Course

During fall 2005 and spring 2006, 11 undergraduate students (eight women and three men) at the Pennsylvania State University took a two-semester rural sociology course titled Belize Field Research. The course focused on planning and implementing a service-learning project in Belize, Central America, during spring break. Designed and led by a professor who had lived in Belize for several years, the course aimed to provide students with an opportunity to work collaboratively with an international Peace Corps volunteer in a rural community, and to help community partners build community capacity, protect the environment, increase food production, and enhance rural incomes in a Belizean village. Students planned two service-learning projects in collaboration with a rural community, a local school, and a nongovernmental

organization (NGO) in order to gain knowledge and experience in the community.

A service-learning methodology was used to encourage students to involve community members and to ensure that their project was grounded in academic content. (Examining the extent to which the projects built on local knowledge and engaged local people in solving community problems is beyond the scope of this article.) In line with the instructor's philosophy and service-learning methodology, students chose their group's project location and planned their own projects, with the guidance of four professors and two graduate student advisors. Both authors served as faculty advisors, but we had no responsibility for the course content.

The first group (community gardening), consisting of seven students, decided to work with a school to create a community garden in Seine Bight, a remote Garifuna village where they stayed with local families. Students developed the garden as a project to teach self-sustaining agricultural techniques and gardening practices that would enhance food consumption and community participation. Students worked with Peace Corps volunteers, school leaders, community members, and an NGO to enhance community support and relevance. They also planned lessons on nutrition, composting, and other agricultural and environmental topics for students at the school. They were supervised on site by first author Esther, a faculty member, a graduate student, and, for the last several days, the lead professor. By the week's end, university and Seine Bight students, along with community residents, had created a garden featuring four raised beds with drip irrigation and several fruit trees, a seed bed, and a composting system. Unfortunately, unknown persons destroyed the garden within several months of its completion, underscoring the difficulty of sustaining ISL projects.

The four students in the second group (marine ecology) planned a project to raise awareness of marine ecology and environmental conservation on Ambergris Caye. Students stayed at a hotel in the tourist town of San Pedro, where they collaborated with a high school conservation club to provide educational activities focusing on marine ecology and the environment. They identified local NGOs and a Peace Corps volunteer to assist with the project. Students led several interactive lessons at the school with both older and younger students. Adverse weather conditions prevented the group from cleaning up trash at a reef with an NGO as they had planned. They were supervised in Belize by the lead professor and a graduate student, while second author Nicole provided guidance and supervision during the project-planning phase.

Student ages ranged from 19 to 24. The group included one freshman, four sophomores, two juniors, three seniors, and one recent graduate. All but one student, a U.S.-born woman of Indian heritage, was White. Many of the students had previous international experiences either through family trips to Europe, church missions, or study abroad. Aside from a student who spent 10 days in Tanzania for a university course, only one student had spent extended time in a nonindustrialized country. Our interactions with students before the trip suggested a mix of motivations for enrolling in the course. Most of the community gardening students invested considerable time in planning a detailed project and lesson plans. Additionally, in some group meetings Nicole observed that marine ecology students talked mostly about what they planned to wear and the fun things they would do in Belize, as if it were an ordinary spring break trip. These concerns foreshadowed what the lead professor would observe in San Pedro.

Research methods

We designed the study to examine student cross-cultural learning and interactions while in Belize. This article addresses the following questions: How did students position themselves in relation to tourists? In what ways did they adopt or move beyond a tourist gaze? What conditions enabled or hindered students from adopting something other than a tourist identity? We recognized from the outset that students would encounter a range of experiences in Belize and believed a qualitative methodology would provide the best foundation to gather data. Specifically, we wanted to provide a flexible approach for collecting “rich and thick” descriptive data in a variety of settings (two Belizean communities) while also seeking to capture the diversity of student perceptions and experiences (*Lincoln & Guba, 1985*). Data sources for this paper include (1) participant-observation prior to the trip (i.e., class sessions where students planned and discussed their projects), (2) participant-observation during the project, (3) a group reflection session regarding student experiences in Belize, (4) student reflections posted to the course website, and (5) semistructured interviews. First author Esther, the lead professor, and a graduate student wrote field notes during the project in Belize.

Upon returning to the United States, we asked for volunteers who were willing to be interviewed about their experiences in Belize. Five women and two men agreed to be interviewed, including four community gardening and three marine ecology participants. Individual interviews were used to understand the student

activities and perceptions that could not be directly observed or captured in a survey (Patton, 1990). Interviewing techniques allowed us to seek and describe the meanings of central themes through a conversational approach (Patton, 1990). A semistructured interview protocol was used to guide each interviewee to discuss discrete events and to explore his or her experience as an engaged student working on a concrete project with Belizeans. The questions also allowed students to tell their story, covering topics such as their prior community service experience, their expectations of Belizean people and culture, the nature of their projects, the involvement of community residents in their projects, their perspective on cross-cultural interactions and adaptation, and what they learned through their projects. Each student was interviewed once, with interviews lasting from 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Participants received a \$10 bookstore gift card for completing the interview.

We conducted a preliminary analysis of the interview transcripts to examine how students perceived Belizean people and culture(s); how they thought locals perceived them; how they wanted or did not want to be perceived; and how their perspectives (e.g., about themselves, Belizeans, community projects) shifted, if at all, throughout their projects. This analysis showed that students identified themselves not as tourists but as individuals who were on a project to help Belizean villagers. This pattern was confirmed by other data sources such as student postings to the class discussion board and comments during group reflection. We then analyzed the data by examining references to tourism and tourists, Americans and the United States, and Belize and Belizeans. Students would no doubt have formed different impressions after a project of longer duration. However, since short-term projects lasting one semester or less are a popular type of service-learning¹ (Tryon et al., 2008), this study may yield insights into the ways students in such projects represent their identities and cross-cultural interactions.

Our role as faculty advisors gave us access to students and shaped our relationships with them. We served in a voluntary, advisory capacity and played no role in determining grades or course content. Further, we assured students that their decision to be interviewed would not affect their grade and that only we would read the interview transcripts. To increase students' willingness to share openly, each author interviewed students from the group she had *not* supervised. Nevertheless, the faculty-student relationship and the communicative norms embedded in interviews (Briggs, 1986) likely shaped how students represented themselves and their

experiences. Faculty observations provided valuable insights into student actions before and during the project, complementing or diverging from the ways students portrayed themselves in the interviews.

Findings

Understanding the Context: The Cultures of Belize, Central America

Belize is both a Central American and a Caribbean country. As the only English-speaking country in Central America, Belize is an ideal location to take English-speaking students. Although the nation is racially, ethnically, and linguistically heterogeneous, students tended to equate Belizean and indigenous culture, for example, by viewing punta, a contemporary rhythm and dance with roots in West African rhythms, as a *Belizean* rather than a *Garifuna* cultural practice. A student's comment concerning Catholic religious practices in Seine Bight further demonstrates this tendency. The student noted that she had anticipated encountering Garifuna religious practices but "didn't expect [Belizeans] to be very, very Catholic." Such comments portray Garifuna cultural and religious practices as authentically Belizean, untouched by Western or European influences. Ironically, the Garifuna epitomize cultural hybridity: They are descendents of Black Carib and Amerindian peoples who escaped from slave plantations in St. Vincent, West Indies. While Seine Bight is a traditional Garifuna village, student comments equating Belizean and Garifuna cultures applied not only to the village but to the nation as a whole.

During interviews, students related that before the trip they were unsure what the country and culture would be like, and how local people would receive them. Overwhelmingly, students described Belizeans as open, friendly, relaxed, laid back, inviting, welcoming, and accepting—qualities that one student contrasted with prior trips to France and Tanzania. Students, especially in the Seine Bight group, were surprised that Belizeans accepted them so readily and showed such interest in learning about students and in working in the garden: "I really wasn't expecting to be that welcomed into the community. Like by the end of the week, I just felt like I've lived there, sometimes." Students tended to attribute Belizean friendliness to their stronger "sense of community."

Constructing the Tourist

We turn now to discussing how students positioned themselves in relation to tourists. In student reflections on the project, the

tourist was a powerful construct, specifically as a foil to students' actions. In interviews students tended to characterize tourists as White U.S. or Canadian citizens who (1) are "there to spend money, have a good time," and party; (2) act in a loud, obnoxious, rude manner; (3) "come to see their country and leave"; and (4) engage in harmful actions such as littering. For instance, one student thought Belizeans would see them as "tourists who just come and don't really socialize, don't really get into the culture, just wanna be at the beach and leave." Another student commented:

It was still surprising to see, like, the [Belizean] kids were just upset because a lot of people just come and throw their garbage and leave. And like that was their idea of tourists and I know, like . . . there's a lot of people that are like that. But not all people come over there . . . or do that, so that was a little surprising. . . . You feel bad, though, because you don't want people from other countries just seeing Americans as just people who come and trash their island, you know, kinda sad but. . .

These remarks reveal how student constructions of tourists incorporated their own perspectives with comments from Belizeans. Additionally, the conflation of "Americans" and "tourists" suggests that students inferred what Belizeans thought of White *Americans* by learning how they perceived *tourists*. Likewise, students sensed their actions would shape Belizeans' perceptions of American tourists.

Tourists were also racialized as White, as when a student noted they were initially treated like tourists in San Pedro because they were "all pale." (A Seine Bight teacher asked Esther whether the Indian-origin student was American, suggesting he expected Americans to be White.) In short, students generally constructed a stereotypical image of superficial, White, American tourists who remain detached from local people and show little regard for the impressions they leave or the social and ecological consequences of their actions. While this simplistic view overlooks other ways of being a tourist, it mirrors the overwhelmingly negative perceptions of tourists in popular culture and, concomitantly, the prevalent desire not to self-identity as a tourist (McCabe, 2005).

Contesting the Tourist Label

Students tended to position themselves as individuals who were initially perceived as tourists, especially in San Pedro, but did not *want* to be seen as such. For instance, a San Pedro student

related, “Well, since it was a tourist culture I pretty much thought that they would see us as tourists—strictly tourists at first. But then once we got to know some of the people they recognized us around the town. We just became more familiar.” According to a San Pedro student, in fact, the most culturally challenging aspect of being in Belize was “getting over the impression that we were just tourists,” which involved both him and others overcoming this impression. He explained why he did not want to be perceived as a tourist: “Well it’s just like, kind of the impression that you’re a tourist who’s there to spend money, have a good time. We were there to really interact with the local culture, share knowledge.” In sum, students portrayed themselves as well-intentioned individuals who, despite their project’s short duration, wanted to transcend superficial, consumption-based interactions and, in so doing, leave Belizeans with a favorable impression of Americans.

During interviews, students used three discursive strategies to establish their nontourist identity. First, they highlighted their *intentions* and *reasons* for being in Belize. For instance, a student wrote that Seine Bight residents accepted students because they saw “that we were not tourists and that . . . our intentions were genuine.” These intentions included wanting to learn more about the community, Belizean culture(s), and the nation; and carrying out projects intended to benefit community residents, including elementary and high school students. Unlike tourists who were “there just to party” or “to spend money and have a good time,” San Pedro students emphasized that they were “actually trying to get to know people” and to “really interact with the local culture [and] share knowledge,” reciprocally.

Second, students differentiated their *actions* and *demeanor* from those of tourists, illustrating how they used the *tourist* as a construct to interpret their experiences. Seine Bight students emphasized that they stayed with families, implemented a project, and worked in the community’s garden. For example, one student wrote, “I felt that our team was extremely accepted into the community as soon as the villagers realized what we were doing and that we were not tourists.” This suggests that students believed their actions—working with local residents to create a garden—distinguished them from tourists, which encouraged their acceptance by villagers.

San Pedro students also described how they sought to counter local perceptions of American tourists by modifying their actions and communication style—another way of signaling their nontourist conduct. As one student put it, “you feel bad . . . because

you don't want people from other countries just seeing Americans as just people who come and trash their island." Keen to show that "not all Americans are like that," students believed they gave Belizeans a different impression of Americans, as when one student described what Belizeans had learned from her and the other students:

I think from when we were talking to the kids [on the beach] they had this idea that tourists were coming just to see their country and leave. And I think they were so surprised that we'd just sit there and talk with them. . . . I just think they got a different idea about [how] some people aren't just coming to, like, exploit their country, you know. So, hopefully they got a little bit of [a] different idea about us—people their age.

Here, the student identifies students' willingness to "just sit there and talk" as evidence of unselfish intentions, that they were not "coming to exploit their country."

Some students altered their communication style to dispel negative perceptions of Americans. For example, a student related a story about being told by a British tour guide in France, "You Americans are so loud," prompting her to monitor her subsequent actions in Belize:

I think we were all kind of careful; we didn't want to like come off like rude or anything. So, we were just really careful on, like, how we talked and how we spoke to the people and we didn't want to come off as like cocky Americans, you know. We were, um, nice.

Specifically, the group tried to "act a little quieter and less loud and obnoxious." During a posttrip group reflection session, San Pedro students explained that they endured several days with no running water at a hotel after leaving San Pedro because they did not want to complain and be perceived as "rude Americans." Like the American study abroad students in Dolby's (2007) study, our university students also tried to distance themselves from the "boorish" behavior of the "stereotypical 'bad' American," seeking instead to "personify" the "good American" (pp. 148, 151). In so doing, they displayed increased awareness of their role in reinforcing or dispelling images of careless, inconsiderate American tourists, and of the impact actions such as recycling could have in distant locales.

The third discursive strategy employed by the students to establish their nontourist identity was to appeal to their *treatment by tourists, local residents, and shop owners* as evidence of their nontourist identity. For example, one student recounted that on their last day in San Pedro a “bunch of tourists” asked them where the grocery store was. The student recalled, “They were asking us all these questions and it was kind of cool because it kind of made us feel like we knew what we were doing, kind of belonged a little bit.” That tourists asked the students for directions suggested they had insider knowledge and credibility. Likewise, another student noted that San Pedro high school students “were very accepting. And they really didn’t treat us like we were just tourists. They treated us like we were there to stay.” Paradoxically, university students were not “there to stay,” yet Belizeans’ friendliness made them *feel* different from tourists. Interactions with people in town also made students feel like they belonged:

Towards the end of the week, after we’d taught the kids, and we’d walk down the street they’d run up to us and say “hi” and they’d introduce us to their little sisters and brothers. It felt like we meant something to them; we weren’t just . . . walking around their little town, you know. . . . The people [in the food stands] . . . would be like “Oh, hey, how are you doing today?” It was just really nice. They would talk to us like we were real people and not just tourists.

A Seine Bight student similarly observed that by the week’s end, local residents “treated us like we were just average people—maybe not like their own people, you know, but like we were their friends.” Another student shared that while hanging out at a village bar people “talk[ed] to us like we were a local,” leading students to conclude, “We really do kind of fit in.” That the latter interaction occurred in a bar illustrates MacCannell’s (1973) assertion that “being ‘one of them,’ or at one with ‘them,’ means, in part, being permitted to share back regions with ‘them’” (p. 592).

Seemingly nominal expressions of civility—exchanging greetings, making introductions and small talk—led students to conclude that locals considered them friends, which meant they were not tourists. While recognizing they could not become Belizeans’ “own people,” students implied that tourists become multidimensional human beings when locals talk to or otherwise recognize them, especially outside consumer interactions. This treatment,

in students' minds, transformed their identity from tourists into "average people" or "friends"—people who had in some ways become, or were accepted by, insiders.

The Tourist Gaze

Although students wanted to be seen as nontourists, in some ways their actions and remarks reflected a tourist gaze, while in others they exhibited a more reflective stance. The tourist gaze is evident in these comments by a Seine Bight student:

I had a lot of funny conversations with [a community resident] and he was so interested in where I was from, which I was surprised from 'cause I was asking him all of these questions and he was like, "Well where are you from?" . . . So I was just surprised that they were interested in learning about me; when I was there I wanted to learn about them. I realized it was more of a give-and-take.

When asked how community residents adapted to having students in the village, this student responded, "I guess I always thought of it as us adapting to them." These statements signal a tourist gaze in that students expected to ask questions of local residents and adjust to their way of life, but did not expect *reciprocal* questioning and adaptation. They did not expect locals to gaze back (Maoz, 2006) and show interest in learning about them. Similarly, tourists—and academics involved in outreach projects—often assume an asymmetrical relationship in which they ask questions of locals while revealing little about themselves.

Students also evidenced a tourist gaze when they articulated a belief in a pure, essential Belizean culture. In this written postproject reflection, a San Pedro student described her view of Belizean culture:

Before this class, I don't think I had ever even heard of Belize and I knew nothing about it. I got the opportunity to experience their culture while I was there and my favorite part, punta dancing. Tick tock, tick tock. They had unique music and a unique culture. Even though we were in a tourist area, *it hadn't really been tainted and the true culture was still present and easy to see.* [emphasis added]

The differentiation between tourism and the “true” or “actual” culture reflects the “coral reef” (*Keesing, 1994*) model of culture, which portrays culture as self-perpetuating, self-contained, unchanging, strongly demarcated, and having an essential character. Likewise, this student framed Belizean culture as something pure that can be contaminated. The expectation, noted earlier in the article, of encountering Garifuna cultural practices rather than Catholic, British, or American influences in Belize, also illustrates how the tourist gaze focuses on cultural boundedness and homogeneity (*Hoffman, 1999*) and differences between one’s own and other cultures. In this way, the tourist gaze “blind[s] us to the connections that actually form those cultures and to the uneven power relations that continue to structure the world” (*Dolby, 2003, p. 67*).

These perceptions of culture are related to tourists’ search for authenticity “in other historical periods and cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles” (*MacCannell, 1976/1989, p. 3 in Dolby, 2003*). Like the following Seine Bight student, several students commented on Belizeans’ stronger “sense of community” and unified culture:

It’s more of a community than it is here. They actually care about their neighbors, everyone knows each other; they’re willing to do anything pretty much. Like if someone’s falling on a hard time they’d lend a hand, where[as] I don’t think people up here [in the U.S.] know the word “community” anymore.

Another Seine Bight student contrasted the strong Garifuna “cultural pride” with her own mixed European ethnic heritage: “To have that one culture and be so connected . . . It was so exciting to see that. . . . I was kind of jealous, ’cause I wish I could have that.” These statements evoke a quintessentially American insecurity about the adequacy of American culture and communities, coupled with a longing for places that have retained their *gemeinschaft* quality, where neighbors still help each other.² Such communities are typically located outside our own ethnic identity and geographical borders. Also evident here is the tendency to attribute harmony and solidarity to other cultures (*Hoffman, 1999, p. 472*). Taken together, student remarks illustrate Urry’s (1990/2002) observation that “Tourists show a particular fascination in the ‘real lives’ of others that somehow possess a reality hard to discover in their own experiences” (p. 9).

Finally, San Pedro student comments and actions during the planning phase revealed hints of a tourist mentality. The lead professor’s

observations (recorded in field notes) provide further evidence of the tourist gaze during the trip, in contrast to students' claims:

Once the [Marine Ecology] Team got to Belize, the spirits of the group were high (almost giddy in fact) but it was less clear if they were focused on the project work ahead of them or simply excited to be in a warm tropical country for Spring Break.

After spending several days with the San Pedro group, the lead professor concluded that three of the four students were "clearly there to be tourists" (Esther's field notes). The professor reflected in his field notes on his conversations with these students:

One student was quite defensive at my suggestion that they weren't learning as deeply about the culture [as the Seine Bight group] and she argued strongly that they were interacting with the locals during their shopping trips in local souvenir shops. . . . She argued that a foreigner could experience American culture by simply visiting fast food restaurants and retail outlets. To her, a retail clerk would be able to transmit a version of their culture (within that particular context). While she had a valid point, I was astounded that she really believed she was sampling the local culture by shopping for trinkets—a post-modernist perspective to be sure.

"Shopping for trinkets" encapsulates the consumption of culture central to tourist activity (Urry, 1990/2002) but contrasts sharply with the underlying principles of ISL and university engagement.

Moving Beyond the Tourist Gaze

Although students in some ways exhibited a tourist gaze, we also found evidence that they developed a more nuanced perspective. First, some students began to trace the influence of U.S. consumer goods and popular culture on Belize, realizing how these have often exacerbated social, economic, environmental, and health problems. In so doing, students began to transcend the tourist's focus on disconnection (Dolby, 2003), seeing instead links between Belizeans' well-being and the global economy, pollution, food production, and the like. Here a student describes what she learned through conversations with local residents:

I think [the project] really made me think about the effect that America and Americanization is having on the Belizean people. . . . They used to be a farming community. . . . But now it's all of this American sugar-filled food with like preservatives and stuff. Kids are starting to eat that stuff all the time. . . . Our host mom, she just was saying about how bad she thinks it is and I think so, too. And you can even see that in America—we have McDonald's feeding us junk food all the time. . . . As [my host mom] was saying to me, it's caused health problems [e.g., diabetes].

The student went on to discuss the influence of cable television, specifically BET (Black Entertainment Television), a popular station in Seine Bight, wondering whether this immersion in “Americanized stuff” made community residents “lose sight” of Garifuna culture. As discussed in the next section, San Pedro students became more conscious of local residents' perceptions of tourists and the consequences of tourism in Ambergris Caye. In short, students became more aware of, and reflective about, the ways in which the United States and their own actions as U.S. citizens affected Belizeans.

Second, producing something together with Seine Bight community residents and students put university students in the position of learning from and relying on others, allowing them to move beyond both the consumption of culture and doing something *for* rather than *with* others. By working in the garden with local people—school pupils, teachers, ex-convicts, Rastafarians, and others—students were able to interact with them in ways unavailable to most tourists. Moreover, as the lead professor observed, the time-consuming, physically demanding nature of their work afforded them little time to visit nearby tourist sites focused on pleasure.

Home Stays and Hotels

Interviews and observational data reveal that the project locations and type of accommodations offered a range of identities, encouraging students to adopt more or less tourist-like roles. Staying with local families, including a gay couple, and working on the garden structured what the Seine Bight students did, where they went, and with whom they interacted, giving them greater access to “back regions” (*MacCannell, 1973*) seldom available to tourists. For instance, they ate most meals with their host family and spent most of the day at the school, both in classrooms and in

the garden. These spaces had not been commoditized (Cohen, 1988). That is, they were not created or arranged for tourist consumption but for family and community sustenance. The home stays were an intimate experience that rendered students vulnerable, partly because they did not have the comforts of hotels or their American homes.

This student's written reflection demonstrates the powerful impact of living with a family for six days:

My favorite part of the experience was, without a doubt, the home stays. By staying with locals I felt I truly got an understanding about what life was like in a developing country. I gained a much better appreciation for what problems were faced by the village and what their culture was like. I think it also helped us to be accepted into the community much faster because they saw that we were not tourists and that . . . our intentions were genuine. We wanted to learn more about the community and be accepted into it. . . . During my stay in Belize I realized just the level of impact service projects could have in a community and I learned the importance of being connected to a community you are working with. Had we not stayed with the families and become such a part of their lives we would have never learned about their additional concerns [with] respect to the community, nor learned about their expertise in gardening. Instead, we may have assumed that due to the lack of gardens within the community they neither had the skills or interest in community gardening. But this was not the case. Instead, what they lacked was the capital and resources to complete such daunting tasks. All the drive and desire was already present in the community, they just need a little help tapping into it.

Notably, this student contended that staying with families helped students gain acceptance by showing that they were not tourists and that they had "genuine" intentions: specifically, they wanted to learn about the community. Students' reflections on the home stays evoke MacCannell's (1973, p. 602) observation that the tourist quest for "authentic experiences, perceptions, and insights" is "marked off in stages in the passage from front to back [regions]"—in this case, villagers' homes. Second, staying with families enabled students to learn firsthand about community history, resident views

of local problems, and the like. In this way, students discovered local knowledge and expertise about gardening, which discouraged them from making unwarranted assumptions about local people's skills and interests (see *Ver Beek, 2002*). Staying with families enabled students to construct local residents as knowledgeable persons (see *MacCannell, 1999, p. xxi*), thereby departing from the tourist gaze.

For the San Pedro students, the tourist town location and hotel stays, coupled with their limited time with high school students, appeared to encourage some tourist-like behaviors and attitudes. Students chose this popular tourist site as a location after another project on turtle conservation fell through. The lead professor wrote in his field notes, "By the time I realized that the [project's] serious environmental research and service-learning components were gone it was late January, and it seemed too late to cancel the project." As previously noted, students claimed that despite the tourist location they were still able to see the "true culture." They felt especially connected to students in the school, where they presented lessons on marine ecology, and to a group of youth with whom they talked for several hours on the beach. Aside from their time in the school, however, university students were mainly limited to "front regions" (*MacCannell, 1973*) such as hotels, restaurants, and shops designed for tourists, and most of their interactions were initiated or based on buying goods and services. For example, the aforementioned conversation on the beach began when the youth tried to sell students jewelry and other products. Students also framed their conversations with small business owners and tourism employees as authentic ways of experiencing the local culture. One student, for instance, reported that he got to know and felt connected "to a couple of the shop owners," restaurant owners, and their cook and guide.

Based on his observations of the two projects, the lead professor concluded in his field notes:

In retrospect, I would not encourage another service-learning project in a major tourist center again. Oddly enough, the youth gardening project was located near a tourist center—but the home stays and the sheer physical nature of the work kept the students focused on their village, and effectively limited their interest or ability to frequent the usual tourist haunts.

Here, the professor suggests that a tourist-oriented location, combined with hotel accommodations, orients students toward tourist-like

nation. We argue that for students in this ISL course, the *tourist*—characterized by students as a stereotypically superficial North American—was a powerful rhetorical device for framing their identities and actions. That students distinguished their experiences from those of tourists reveals the tendency of travelers to interpret their experiences *in relation to* those of others (McCabe, 2005; Urry, 1990/2002). Students expressed an aversion to tourists, using the term “as a derisive label for someone who seems content with his obviously inauthentic experiences” (MacCannell, 1973, p. 592). Although this perspective excludes many types of tourists, it underscores students’ keen awareness of popular characterizations of vulgar, usually American, tourists, and their desire to construct a more socially acceptable identity in this outreach project. We believe that short-term service trips to international locales, such as Alternative Spring Break, which provides college students with opportunities to volunteer during spring break, would be an ideal way to investigate not only how students compare themselves both to tourists and to those students who choose pleasure-oriented spring break trips but also how local people perceive students involved in service and outreach projects in contrast to how they perceive tourists (King, 2004; Maoz, 2006).

To construct themselves as nontourists, students appealed to their intentions, their actions, and their treatment by local residents. Their desire to leave a good impression on Belizeans suggests they saw themselves as representatives of the United States, knowing their words and actions would feed into local images of Americans and tourists. Similar to Dolby’s (2004) findings, “there were students who were embarrassed by the stereotypical image of ‘Americans’ and actively worked to subvert it” (p. 169; see also Dolby, 2007). In this way, student concerns signal awareness that they are objects of the “local gaze” (Maoz, 2006).

Despite their discursive rejection of the tourist identity, students did in some ways exhibit a tourist gaze: for example, by interacting with local people primarily as consumers or by assuming a unified, “true,” untouched Belizean culture with a strong “sense of community.” Evident here is students’ yearning for a tight-knit community and a strong sense of cultural pride—qualities presumably found outside their own U.S. communities. This search for authenticity and emphasis on demarcated cultural borders illustrate the quintessential tourist gaze (Dolby, 2003; MacCannell, 1999; Urry, 1990/2002). Although our study provides some evidence of the tourist gaze, it also shows how the project complicated students’ perspectives of themselves, others, and social problems: for

example, by exposing them to Belizeans' perceptions of Americans and the ways "Americanization" and tourism have altered communities, both bringing resources and contributing to socioeconomic problems. Through conversations with local residents, students encountered "an American self" (Dolby, 2004) in Belize and became more conscious of their nationality.

This study raises questions about how to interpret students' simultaneous rejection and exhibition of tourist-like actions and perspectives. Given what students learned about local views of tourists—and the global prevalence of antitourist attitudes—students may have highlighted their nontourist actions to distance themselves from this negative image and to convince faculty interviewers and themselves that they took the service-learning project seriously. Another possibility is that, as Cohen (1988) suggests, some tourists (or students) are less concerned with having an existential, authentic experience when they travel, and therefore apply loose criteria when judging what is culturally authentic. This could help explain why students presented chat-

“Although our study provides some evidence of the tourist gaze, it also shows how the project complicated students’ perspectives of themselves, others, and social problems.”

ting with shopkeepers and other seemingly superficial interactions as authentic cultural experiences. However, students' insistence that they were *not tourists* suggests they perceived contradictions between the identities they adopted in Belize and the ways they wished to be seen, both by instructors and by community residents. Additional research could examine what students and educators consider to be authentic cross-cultural experiences and how their ISL and university outreach experiences meet or fall short of their criteria.

Finally, the findings illustrate how the project location and accommodations encouraged students to adopt a more or less tourist-like stance. When students are confined primarily to tourist centers they may have fewer opportunities for sustained interaction with local people, since they are likely to enter mainly the "front regions" of shops, hotels, and other locales where culture has been "staged" for tourists (MacCannell, 1973). At the same time, tourism is part of the local culture and, as Greenwood (1982) asserts, all culture is "staged authenticity" in that cultures continually reinvent themselves. Thus, the problem is not that students in tourist centers

do not experience the “true culture” or that they are destined to have shallow experiences (see Urry, 1990/2002, *on the post-tourist*). If they were studying the consequences of tourism-related development, for example, these sites would be an ideal choice. Rather, the risks are that when students inhabit tourism-dominated locales only, they are exposed to fewer facets of local life, and their interpersonal interactions are based mainly on consumption, which in turn may restrict the scope of their learning. Specifically, students may be less likely (1) to experience the discomfort and displacement upon which perspective transformation depends (Mezirow, 1997) and (2) to step out of a detached, observational role. Both are key goals of service-learning courses (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007).

By contrast, staying with families enables students to experience a wider slice of community life—including its “back regions” (MacCannell, 1973)—and to shift from “learning about” to “learning from the other” (Hoffman, 1999). Of course, home stays do not guarantee deeper learning, but they do create a structure wherein students experience the local rhythms of daily life, learn informally from their host about the problems the students came to address, and receive their host’s hospitality, which is often a humbling experience. The kinds of interactions that home stays encourage can help satisfy Ver Beek’s (2002) concern that North American students listen to, observe, and respect Third World citizens “before trying to do something” (p. 68). Future research could explore how different types of accommodations and immersion in more or less tourist-oriented settings shape student learning, interactions, and self-concept.

The findings have a number of implications for the design of ISL and international outreach projects. First, educators should equip students to identify local perceptions of tourists and citizens from their home country and to consider how they might reinforce or challenge these images, both consciously and unconsciously. This suggestion applies to projects in any locale, domestic or international, where university representatives are considered outsiders. Second, the study suggests the need to examine how students conceptualize culture, and to help them shift from simplistic perspectives to a recognition of cultural flux, within-group heterogeneity, and porous cultural boundaries (Hoffman, 1999). In this way, students would develop a more nuanced, less romanticized perspective of their host country or community, and see something besides “otherness.”

Another way to redirect the tourist gaze is to produce something that draws on student and community resident knowledge and energy. In so doing, students can forge reciprocal relationships that transcend mere service or consumption (*Smith-Pariolá & Gòkè-Pariolá, 2006*). Although Ver Beek (2002) warns against “doing” at the expense of “learning,” the lesson here is that working alongside people to create something allows students to relate to, and learn from, residents in ways that most tourists do not. Finally, the findings highlight the need to carefully select project sites and accommodations; to decide when tourism-oriented towns and hotels are appropriate; to provide direction and guidance for students pre- and postdeparture; and to ensure that student leadership (i.e., responsibility for planning the project, including the location and accommodations) does not undermine the types of learning and student identities that educators wish to nurture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how students in international service-learning projects construct their identities in relation to tourists and the ways in which they simultaneously exhibit and depart from tourist-like actions and attitudes. The study suggests the need to identify and nurture programmatic practices that enable students to move away from a tourist gaze, especially in short-term projects (*King, 2004; Rhoads & Neururer, 1998; Tryon et al., 2008*). This gaze, we contend, is problematic because it counteracts several fundamental principles and goals of ISL and university outreach, such as the desire to cultivate a distinctive gaze—one that is based on mutually respectful relationships; that does not objectify or romanticize others; and that recognizes project partners, the host country, and the host community as complex entities. By providing intensive, structured opportunities to learn and interact informally with local people in sites created for purposes other than tourist consumption, international education and outreach experiences can equip students to be more than educational tourists. Indeed, when student actions diverge from those of the pleasure-seeking tourist, university-community relationships are more likely to flourish, and to provide mutual benefits to students and community members alike.

Note

Previous versions of this article were presented in 2007 at the 7th Annual International Research Conference on Service-Learning

and Community Engagement in Tampa, Florida, and in 2007 at the 22nd Congress of the European Society for Rural Sociology at Wageningen University, The Netherlands.

Endnotes

¹For instance, a Google search for “service-learning” and “spring break” yielded 51,300 results.

²We are indebted to David Post for making this observation.

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