Enlarging and Emancipating the Study Abroad Experience:
a view from Venezuela

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Study abroad purports to bring the world closer together by creating opportunities for students to interact with cultural Others, but could easily be seen as a neocolonial project in Third World countries. In this paper, I draw on my work directing a study abroad program in Venezuela to complicate the study abroad setting in Latin America, to question its taken-for-granted nature and to suggest ways to raise critical considerations about its practice, curriculum, and the encounters it facilitates. The paper concludes that such issues must be voiced, not to disable our practice, but rather, to enable study abroad in Latin America to meet its potential as a transformative educational experience.

Introduction

Study abroad purports to bring the world closer together by creating opportunities for students to immerse themselves in foreign cultures and to engage cultural Others in dialogues that challenge their ethnocentric visions of the world. It is hoped, even assumed, that these interactions will be positive ones for all involved, contributing to the eradication of stereotypes and prejudices, and opening the way towards a more empathetic global future. Despite its lofty goals however, the study abroad experience is embedded in a range of assumptions and desires that have not been examined critically in much of the literature. As more programs begin to appear in Third World countries in particular, questions about power, definitions of culture, reciprocity, and other issues loom large and beg further study.

John Dewey, one of the most influential philosopher-pedagogues in the US, stated that the purpose of education was to enlarge and emancipate experience (1916). While Dewey was concerned with preparing students for a life of participation in the American democratic system, his words are quite aptly applied to educating students for participation in a globally constructed present/future. If study abroad is posited as a serious educational project that attempts to prepare students to better communicate across cultures and function in an internationalized world, it too should be enlarged and emancipated. It must be bigger than a quick résumé filler or a break from the monotony of college campuses, and it must be liberated from some of the current conceptual constraints and negative constructions that surround this endeavor.

This paper takes a tentative first step towards enlarging and emancipating the study abroad experience by raising some critical considerations about its conceptualization and practice in one particular program, the Pitzer College in Venezuela program. It attempts to map some roads towards critical practice (rather than render an account of success achieved or work finished), and it represents, in effect, a search for methodological strategies to challenge the taken-for-granted nature of study abroad in Latin America from the field. While I draw from the literature and, occasionally, from an informal survey of other Latin American program directors, the paper focuses on my experiences directing a study abroad program in Venezuela over the past four years. The first section complicates the “problem” itself, examining the polarized positions from which one could view study abroad in Venezuela. This is necessary work since study abroad professionals, sender institutions, and students (let alone hosts) usually do not talk about these issues. The paper then critically reconsiders specific on-site issues related to the enactment and practice of study abroad in the Pitzer College in Venezuela program (from
here on referred to simply as “the Venezuela program.”) It questions how students and hosts “know” each other in Mérida, the city we function in, and how this knowing is embedded in larger level processes. It unmasks seemingly objective curriculum decisions, and also uproots some ideas about the key actors on-site in the Venezuela program—namely, the staff, the students, and the Mérida hosts. A final section concludes with a brief discussion of how this work led to subsequent pedagogical changes in the program, and a few suggestions for practice.

**The Pitzer College in Venezuela program**

The *Pitzer College in Venezuela* program was established in Venezuela in 1996, on the western Caribbean coast, and then moved to the university city of Mérida, located in the Andes on Venezuela’s western border with Columbia, in 1997. The program is run by Pitzer College, a small, private liberal-arts college located about an hour from Los Angeles, and it is one of ten semester-long study abroad programs directed by the College. The Venezuela program has averaged about 8 students per semester, with 15 being the cut-off mark for number of participants. About one-third to half of the students are enrolled at Pitzer; the others are drawn from other small, private schools such as Swarthmore, Wesleyan University, and Occidental College, among others. Almost all students are in their junior year, and all thus far have been between 19 and 22 years old. About 70% are female, and there has also been (although the sample is too small to know yet how relevant this is) a relatively high number of minority students, both Latino and African American. While the sending institutions are some of the more expensive schools in the US, students come from all economic levels. They thus share similar academic experiences, but have widely varying class affiliations, rural-urban identities, previous travel background, home situations, etc.

Study abroad is highly valued at Pitzer, and it has been strongly supported by both the faculty and the administration. Attesting to this is the fact that almost 70% of Pitzer’s students go abroad during the four years, whether on Pitzer’s own programs or via other institutions. Pitzer College’s own study abroad model is experientially-based, including homestays, intense language study, lectures, fieldwork, critical writing/reflection about the experience itself, and independent research projects. Pitzer aims to provide students with a coherent and meaningful experience within another culture, and asks students, to the extent possible, to live the local lifestyle, which means limiting their options to those available locally, and fully integrating themselves into all facets of daily life. The homestays are graded, and in Venezuela, the immersion process itself is studied, documented, analyzed and incorporated into academic work for the semester. The program is highly facilitated, both formally and informally. There are two foreign full-time staff members (one Latin American, non-Venezuelan, and one American), and a range of contracted positions filled by a few foreigners but mostly locals, including homestay families, language teachers, visiting lecturers for the program’s core course, drivers, guides, etc.
Conceptualizing the Venezuela program within notions about study abroad in Latin America

The Venezuela program occupies a multidimensional position in terms of power. It is enmeshed in a range of relationships and work-sites that are not always spatially, linguistically or culturally bounded in any easy or permanent sense. It includes offices on both sides of the border, with the result that planning and decision-making take place through unusual means of communication and often within very different technological, social and cultural contexts that somehow must fit together. Regular staff changes typical of any office, a constantly changing student body, an evolving host-family participation, as well as new political and economic considerations keep things from getting too standardized, although when viewed next to other Pitzer College programs or other institutions’ programs, it is clear that it has its own character and mini-culture. Despite the fact that many (if not all) US-organized study abroad experiences in Latin America have this sort of interconnected relationship with home campuses or offices, study abroad is usually only studied as a sub-part of the American university experience or, less often, as an unconnected field experience in a given country. It is rarely considered in broader connected form. An examination of how study abroad in Latin America can be viewed from either of these polarized angles reveals some interesting issues about power, status, and the construction of knowledge about this profession. It also serves as a key first step in situating the Venezuela program.

The view from above

Within the US university system and overall college experience, a study abroad program in Venezuela suffers from a triple marginalization as an academic undertaking. The peripheral nature of the field of study abroad itself, the divide created between the field-site and the home-office, and constructions of Latin America within possible sites for study, all make study abroad in Venezuela a rather oppressed project. As a field, study abroad is marginalized in academia, and traditionally it has been perceived as sort of a “finishing school” for college students, icing on but not itself the cake of learning and critical thinking. It has suffered from negative labeling, often viewed as the semester “off,” or the easy-A term. Students are not always guaranteed credit for these experiences, and many universities create a list of select programs that “count,” leaving students who wish to travel to non-list places faced with taking a semester of academic leave. Students then occasionally arrive here introducing themselves as “normally” university students, but currently away from school, in Venezuela, as if the academic nature of the program (so stressed in our orientations Stateside!) did not really figure into their definitions of school. This creates an instant conflict when we receive students “on leave” and then try to enlist them in sharing a vision of this experience as a critical intellectual undertaking.

One of the reasons colleges may look skeptically at many study abroad experiences is that the field of study abroad is only now being constituted and speaking for itself. There are few journals and limited publications that focus on study abroad, although this is changing, and this lack of formal published presence cannot be good for a field wishing to be taken seriously in academia. Furthermore, such a situation inadvertently reinforces oppositions between theory and practice, thinking and experiencing, the academy and the
real world. The literature that does exist tends to focus on study abroad’s overall benefits within a context of university study, but there is very little qualitative work on the nature of this experience for students, and even less reflective work available on its facilitation/practice. This means that those who commit to study abroad enter into and develop this profession without benefit of a clearly defined canon or recognized career path. There are also no great heroes of the field or “founding fathers” per se.

Some of this is good, of course, because there is still much room for action and freedom from the more tightly constrained traditional academic career. However, as with any other field that begins on the margins of academia and constructs itself inter-disciplinarily (e.g. Women’s Studies, Latin American Studies, Cultural Studies), this shaping and defining is a contested process that responds to a range of agendas and factors. Decisions about where a study abroad office is housed within a university (in International Studies, in Off-Campus Affairs, with incoming foreign students), what sort of people staff it both at home and in the field (recent graduates or Ph.D’s, administrators or academics), what sites constitute appropriate/safe/interesting places for a program (professor interests, political issues) – all of these factors shape the formation of offices and programs, and have not been looked at systematically to date. As there are mounting pressures on both sides of the border to produce high quality academic experiences and highly administered (i.e. controlled for safety and guaranteed return-on-investment) programs, some of these questions are undoubtedly already being discussed and/or will become increasingly visible. At Pitzer College, study abroad holds perhaps an exceptionally exalted position within the college’s culture, but decisions about its programs are still located within these constraints.

But if in general, in the US, study abroad is still somewhat vaguely understood and valued, in the field, matters only worsen. Most clearly, the field is unprofessionalized. Oftentimes, when this sort of work is done by professors, it is viewed as less academic / less intellectual work than running an on-campus class or seminar. A series of articles on professors who direct study abroad, published in Academe, reveals much about this. In a piece entitled It’s Not a Sabbatical, Krueger finds that “Some colleagues at home will have little comprehension of the demands of the job and may regard the director’s foreign travel and ‘free’ time away with a certain longing” (1995: 31). Another site-director writes that “Many people think that administering a language program abroad is an occasion for a summer vacation and relaxation at the end of a strenuous academic year” (Sawaie, 1995: 35). While there is very little written on directing work, these authors offer some important discussions of how the job is perceived “back home.”

For those non-professors who take on longer-term resident director positions, a move up the ladder generally means a move up north and over the border, a move out of the field and into a slicker home office where policy is made, articles are written, and action is taken in familiar academic ways. This is not unlike what happens in anthropology careers – the romance, danger, and must-do qualities of Latin American fieldwork are the stuff on which careers are begun, but over time, going to the field or staying in the field becomes constrained by professional desires, age, family needs, etc. – i.e. people go back home. Writing the Latin American field site this way ignores the fact that many site staff
are not foreigners in their site, and this sort of thinking undoes the idea behind hiring local/host-national staff in the first place because it re-categorizes them as less serious, less professional, and peripheral within the profession of study abroad. Second, it means that for those US residents who would stay in the field and work from below, they must do so ready to again work without a defined career path, sometimes (but certainly not always) with fewer resources and technology, usually lesser salaries, limited access to US medical benefits, less participation in home university/organizational policy, etc. Structurally, the field is not designed for permanent, flashy, professionalized work.

More disturbing, however, is the fact with some exceptions, there are still few publications coming from the field, despite the relatively universal access we have now to fax machines, email, and overnight mail. There is also next to no commentary on the main study abroad listserv\(^1\) from the field, and to date, there exists no separate listserv for those in the field either. Most of the “talk,” then, about study abroad in Latin America is created in the US, which seems ironic. Representations of this work continue to follow the same periphery-center, North-South paths that have marked much of Latin America’s history.

The construction of study abroad field sites resembles the construction of anthropological field sites, although with different nuances. As in anthropology, the study abroad field site privileges the exotic, the rural, and tropical/unusual landscapes. However, while in anthropology the element of danger plays a key role in defining a serious field site, (historically making study in the US or among upper classes less appropriate), in study abroad this is more complicated. An anthropology graduate student generally assumes responsibility for the unknowns of the field. Study abroad offices, however, are charged with an increasing degree of responsibility for students’ safety, which creates a tension between the idea that the more remote-unknown-rural-exotic-dangerous field site is the most academically appealing one, and the need, now, to control the experience.

Other factors also influence how different field sites are valued. Gupta and Ferguson, (1997: 12) discuss a “hierarchy of purity of field sites,” referring to the construction of some sites as more appropriate for work in particular areas (they mention India for religion, Melanesia for economic anthropology). In study abroad, students are similarly guided towards “appropriate” site decisions. For example, art majors tend towards Italy if they are interested in “high culture,” and get to Latin America if they are more inclined towards craft, despite the known existence of a vital and impressive formal art history in Latin America. Unfortunately, programs in Latin America also carry particularly derogatory images of students carousing in exotic lands of tequila and tropical sunshine that other sites, perhaps, do not conjure up. One of our students on the Venezuela program told us that in our home office, one could easily pick out which prospective study abroader was going where, based on looks, major, political positions, etc. Those going to Europe were more formal, well-dressed art-and-architecture sorts; those going to Nepal were the looked-as-if-could-do-without-bathing-just-fine types. Those coming to Venezuela she characterized as somewhere in between – not averse to a little physical

\(^1\) The listserv referenced here belongs to SECUSSA (Section on US Students Abroad) of NAFSA, the Association of International Educators.
discomfort and exoticness, but also thinking too in terms of professional plans for Spanish use and a bit leery of danger and surprise. Telling indeed… Students also have mentioned that they chose Venezuela because it was precisely less known than Mexico or Central American countries, which they see as much easier to get to physically, and less exotic because of their proximity. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) see this kind of labeling as a sign that the most appropriate field for study is then the least “like home,” again making the really serious study abroaders the Nepal-goers, and in turn, the Western European sojourners the least willing to immerse, thus privileging cultural difference for Nepal and all but denying it for Europe. How does Latin America fit in between these two extremes? How do students, sending institutions and future employers read these experiences? These evaluations are probably evolving in light of increased migration and expanding trade/business relations with Latin America, but they demand further attention. These rather random observations cannot lead to conclusive ideas about how the field in Venezuela or in Latin America is becoming constructed by the media, students, and home offices, but they do point to the need for much more research. It is necessary to understand what sorts of biases and desires play into the formation of knowledge about Latin American sites in order to take these on in a critical fashion.

The view from below
Despite its peripheral constructions in academia, a study abroad program in Venezuela is not without power and influence. Indeed, if the viewpoint is shifted from above the border to below it, one could easily construct our work as a neocolonial venture firmly embedded within larger power structures and global imbalances. Study abroad in Venezuela could be effectively portrayed as the new El Dorado of academia, providing the raw minerals and cash crops of today’s resumes, such as proof of multicultural skills, Spanish fluency, and international volunteer experiences. It could also be criticized as a medium through which students of privilege further their own skills by learning among “hosts” who do not reap with them the increased access to powerful jobs in the new global economy. As we explain regularly to our local constituents, we are not powerful enough or well-connected enough to provide visas for travel or study in the US. As a very small office, we also do not have the staff and resources to teach English or to offer some other sort of on-site education for the local community. More crucially, economics makes it hard to create an even two-way exchange that would allow local students to attend Pitzer College in the States. What one of our students pays for a semester would put a Venezuelan student through both undergraduate and graduate school, and probably still cover books, housing, dissertation production, etc. These are structural problems that stymie even the best intentions of engaging in reciprocity.

Like many programs, we use the terms “guests” and “hosts” to refer to students and locals, yet there is something a bit unsettling about this. We are not here by direct invitation per se, and again, like many programs all over Latin America, the Pitzer one just sort of arrived on the scene, albeit with some willing contacts in place. While this is somewhat unfair, because each program’s history will vary, these terms can convey a relationship that sounds more egalitarian than it may be. Lower and middle-class “host”-families are presented as people anxious to share their homes, lives, tables, customs and thoughts with foreign students. We often gloss over the obvious fact that they are
struggling to make ends meet. Occasionally students (and even colleges) resist recognizing that families’ incorporation of study abroad students into their lives has roots more in a lack of income options than in an excess of carino available to give them. At the same time, there can be expectations that hosts will play rather contrived roles, laying out tradition like vendors in a market for students to pick over. Student-buyers then occasionally adapt (the laid-back schedule for example is an easy sale), and occasionally do not (gender norms are rarely embraced, nor is the Venezuelan diet), but unfortunately they often feel that they are entitled to choose at will when and when not to adapt. This calls into question whether or not they behave as “good” guests should, or, indeed, perceive this to be their role at all. Furthermore, the host-guest relationship in many, if not most, cultures, places a premium on guest comfort and happiness, not on guest adaptability and learning, which also might signal a tension between programs’ positing of hosts as teachers (homestays as learning sites) and hosts’ own perceptions of their roles.

What to do?
One hardly wants to encourage American students not to study difference, to keep their minds closed and to avoid learning how to dialogue across cultures or speak Spanish. This would do little to foster increased intercultural understanding in today’s globalized reality. It seems clear that study abroad is here to stay, so to go on at length lambasting the study abroad project would only yield a rather disabling discussion that can do little to help international educators and colleges create a less colonialized study abroad. We need to accept that in Latin America, study abroad programs function into a situation where the rules of the game have been historically unbalanced. By acknowledging and understanding these conditions, however, it is possible (and crucial) to then re-examine study abroad practice critically at any number of sites and levels. The next part of this paper reflects on specific on-site aspects of creating and running the Venezuela program, raising key questions about practice and pointing to some tentative areas for resistance and action.

Knowing one another before we meet: Mérida and American study abroaders
While more college students seeking to study abroad during their college careers go to Latin American than to any other non-European destination, Venezuela does not have a particularly deep or broad experience with study abroad. A strong Rotary Club presence can be noted in some cities, which brings in some exchange/service programs, and there are also AFS high school programs in some places. Existing university-level programs however, tend to be concentrated in Caracas, with a few programs running out of the Universidad Central, and in Mérida, home to the prestigious Universidad de los Andes. In Mérida, there are then several programs associated with the University, as well as two or three well-known language institutes that accept foreign students, some with a fixed semester program linked to a US university, and others not.

2 The Open Doors 1998-1999 Report (web results) found that currently 15.3% of all students studying abroad go to Latin America, with a full 6.6 % of all students abroad in Mexico, 2.6 in Costa Rica, and 1.1 in Ecuador.
The relative scarcity of programs in this country, especially given the size, diversity and degree of economic development in Venezuela, becomes less surprising if one considers how little presence Venezuela has in Latin American studies in the US. It is one of the least known or studied countries, falling through the cracks since it does not fit into the standard regional or thematic areas\(^3\). Knowledge about Venezuela tends to concentrate to a tremendous degree on OPEC and petroleum issues, and on its processes of democratization that are once again being tested under President Hugo Chávez. There is a relative dearth, however, of social science research in English that discusses Venezuela. There are perhaps half a dozen barrio/urban violence sort of publications about Caracas, and there is the literature created by Napoleon Chagnon and followers’ studies of the Yanomami, but neither of these are incredibly helpful for trying to understand other regions of non-indigenous, middle-class Venezuela. In Mérida, there has been some work done about the city, but anthropology has tended to focus on more salvage-style studies and searches for tradition in the smaller towns of the Andes than on connections between rural and urban life, or the city itself. What little is available is, of course, written in Spanish (an issue for some of our students who cannot fully or comfortably understand a college level Spanish text), and often published in small university journals that are not centrally sold / easy to get hold of.

This lack of knowledge has made forming a study abroad program challenging and unique. On the one hand, both staff and students must seek out opinions of what the “Venezuelan way” is from mostly primary sources, (such as our lecturers or our host-families, staff members, or acquaintances), which does not make for the most critical reading of the current situation. On the other hand, this lack of ready-made expertise keeps all knowledge fairly open to inquiry. Neither teachers nor students run the danger of grabbing an “expert text” and accepting it as dogma. Thus while this situation made the learning process somewhat slower for foreign staff members, it also made it easier to draw students into the process of constructing information. Everyone involved was less convinced they could decree exactly what a given situation “looks like,” or who members of a given sub-section of the population really “are.”

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\(^3\) To briefly and grossly categorize, despite a shared dependence on petroleum, Venezuela has little in common with Mexico and its border, migration, or indigenous issues that are currently receiving much attention in the States. It is close to but also relatively unconnected to Central America, whose nations came into the academic spotlight with the onset of the civil wars of the ‘80’s. These countries’ struggles have little in common with the politics of oil-rich, democratic Venezuela. Caribbean area studies also do not fully include mainland Venezuela, and these sites, while sharing some commonalities with coastal Venezuela, maintain a distinct colonial history with more pronounced effects of slavery, and a much different economic development. Moving downward, Venezuela is not considered within the drug trafficking and guerilla problems of Columbia, even though it is affected by this reality. And while the Andes mountains cut through Venezuela, the country does not form part of the Andean trade pact, nor does it not share a similar ethnic/linguistic/cultural history with Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. And finally, despite a large European population, Venezuela is much more diverse and simply not related to the Europeanized Southern Cone countries. Language and culture (and a lack of population in this area) also separate it from Brazil, even though the border is shared. Thus while Venezuela shares many broad cultural and political characteristics with other Latin American nations, it cannot be easily categorized into regionally defined area studies approaches.
Also related to the lack of published information about Venezuela, is the tendency for students to arrive with few specific preconceptions about this country. The ones they bring tend to be extrapolated from Mexico and general blanket-US portrayals of Latin American culture. Especially early on in the program’s development when there were still few ex-participants who had “brought back the news,” students tended to expect indigenous folk, burritos, and a basic rural setting, despite the fact that information on Venezuela’s urban, mestizo character is openly available in all the guide books. Even now as we move out of some of the wildest preconceptions, we have found that these notions do not entirely disappear. For example, one recent student commented the first week that she had been expecting a host-mom who looked like Rigoberta Menchú in traditional indigenous dress, who had many children, and who lived in abject poverty. She herself was surprised by this since she had been conscious she was coming to a university city. Similarly, another recent student expressed disappointment that she was taking a crowded urban bus to school every morning through traffic, smog, etc., when she had imagined walking through the mountains and perhaps seeing monkeys on the way to school. These images of indigenous-ness and exoticness are deeply entrenched in students. No matter how much we re-write program descriptions and re-design orientation material, the other pressures giving students these messages hold strong. As Casella notes, “… educational travel to Latin America begins not with the movement of bodies into new physical places but with the construction of images in media space” (1999: 206) through movies, immigration, border and trade policy, travel publishing, and the like.

The same thing happens in reverse too, of course. Until recently, Mérida has had relatively minimal experience with Americans. Local tourism is comprised in large part by other Venezuelans, and foreign tourism is still about 70% European in origin. The impact of tourism has also been fairly minor in the city, because most Europeans tend to pass quickly through the city and go on to hike and do other adventure-style sports in the mountains. They stay in modest inns (posadas) scattered through the valleys and mountains of Mérida. Questions about impact have increased through, and there has been more discussion recently about the environmental damage and water pollution caused by increased hotel building in the mountains outside the city. Socially and culturally, while there are quite a few German, Dutch, Belgian and French posada owners and permanent mountain residents, there are not many formal ex-patriot organizations. There is no significant foreign language bookstore, and there are not known foreigner hangouts or things of that nature. Relatively few people speak English still, although this is changing, and in the university, more university professors speak French and have done their graduate work either in Paris, or in many cases, in Mexico, than in the US. Homestay families also do not have 20 years of experience receiving students, unlike what may be the case in other Latin America study abroad sites, for example, Cuernavaca in Mexico, or perhaps San José in Costa Rica, or Antigua in Guatemala.

How then does a city with little history of receiving American students or tourists begin to construct images of them? In the past, and still among some groups, foreigners were called “musus,” from the French, monsieur, but now it is more common to hear “gringo.” The media is certainly playing a strong role in creating knowledge of American Others.
Cable TV is very common even among the middle classes, and this brings in much American programming. Movies are readily available both in the theatre and in rental shops, and these are overwhelmingly American in origin. Internet cafés, while still scarce four years ago, are now booming, and it is common to see three or four within the same block in some parts of the downtown. Finally, while permanent out-immigration is low, travel to Miami for those who can afford it, is common and carries much status. Many local people travel regularly to Miami both to vacation and to buy goods that they resell informally and formally back in Mérida.

While the media and travel account for some sources of information that allow the city to make sense of Americans, surely this is not the whole story. How locals “know” Americans and in particular, American students, is a question that demands more research. If we could know more about the space created by the interactions of students with locals, we could better understand how our students are being perceived and integrated into daily life in the city. Where do encounters take place? What sorts of meanings are associated with these places and the activities performed there? Who do students interact with? Does this change over the course of the semester? Where don’t students go? Who don’t they meet? This sort of broad yet very local knowledge is often held informally by staff members and others associated with the program, but more work on this theme would certainly help us better orient students. It would also allow us to better prepare them to confront certain stereotypes and preconceived images based on race and gender, and to resist engaging in behaviors that reinforce such stereotypes. As Stephenson reminds us, when we seek to understand the nature of intercultural encounters between study abroad students and the new culture, “it is important to broaden the scope beyond that of the study abroad student him/herself” (1999: 2). Students do not interact with a peopleless “culture,” but rather with individuals who are also observing, and who perceive students as cultural Others.

**Curriculum decisions: the politics of presenting a culture**

As in any sort of education in any site, ideological issues underwrite the material we teach, whether our material consists of texts, lectures, contacts with specific individuals, or visits to museums, health clinics, or fragile ecosystems. In study abroad, curriculum design is intensely political – whose voices go into decisions of how to represent a given culture? What is “important” enough to be included? What is excluded, and why? These choices must be made, but they should be critically examined and de-naturalized. When thinking about curriculum choices in the Venezuela program, we became increasingly aware of how Latin American cultures (and Venezuelan culture specifically, when available) are presented in both guidebooks and educational literature about study abroad programs. Many of these representations celebrate unquestioningly a local identity steeped in (trapped in) tradition, which projects a romanticized and unproblematic view of other cultures, and reinforces time-worn images of the exotic and noble savage. In the field, one observes people living modern lives in what some would call a traditional Latin American culture, and there should be a clear ethical obligation here to avoid promoting images of communities that are “timeless,” “untouched,” or “living in the past.” When looking to contextualize traditional culture within current, complex realities, however, it is also necessary to resist going too far in the other
direction, which is to focus exclusively on the negative “givens” of poverty, underdevelopment, and the effects of globalization, the other focus of many Latin American programs. Despite its more problem-orientated nature, this second approach is not inherently more critical than the first, and risks reinforcing the same old dichotomies of first world/third world, modern/traditional, developed/underdeveloped, familiar/exotic. It also places the host country in the position of passive victim or hero in the face of adversity, two rather contrived and unanalyzed roles. While programs are designed to focus on the local – that is why we are on-site – they still need to address the interconnectedness of both “our” and “their” society, and make sure to portray hosts as self-determining, thinking agents.

In Venezuela, when we first began the program, we faced both of these temptations, to create Latin American paradise and Latin American disaster, but the reality we found did not, of course, easily lend itself to either. While this first resulted in the constant reinvention of our core course, in the long run, the refusal of reality to conform to either textbook-style option forced us to seek out new options. This involved, though, a serious questioning of our staff’s ideas about the culture we were observing, since we too brought ideas about Latin American culture to this site, and we too were trying to reconcile preconceptions and local reality. We also struggled as we questioned how much a curriculum should be oriented to “please,” in the interest of engaging student interest. Consider the following example:

Early on in the program, we noted a clash between local and student definitions of what constituted traditional culture. For Venezuelans, Mérida is considered to be a rather exotic place. It is the only cold region in this tropical country, located in the Andes mountains, so people in Mérida have traditionally dressed differently (cold weather clothes/wool ponchos in the past), produced different staple foods (potatoes, garlic, onions), and engaged in different lifestyles (more conservative, less accessible to outsiders). It is considered a bastion of tradition, Catholicism, and rural lore, although Price (1996), in one of the few articles about this region, shows how some of this has been constructed out of both desires for a cultural heartland and the realities of a distinct economic development path. Nonetheless, host-families, Spanish instructors and university lecturers, among others, extol the beauty of local artesanía, the tranquility of the mountains, and the entrenchment of rural tradition in the surrounding areas. Students however, frequently found the city to be surprisingly full of US clothing, internet cafés, and the like, and lacking in such traditional fare as colorful artesanía, indigenous people, and exotic foods. The city is also becoming congested and polluted as the population increases, and seems a far cry from the more pristine mountain atmosphere they have imagined. In essence, when they first arrived, for many students Mérida was often not “Latin American enough” for them. In contrast, in a shorter homestay in a small town on the Caribbean coast, students were (and often still are) convinced that here, indeed, was the “real thing.”

How can this be? When the country is 80% urbanized, how can a city then not represent it? There is something quite telling here that says much about students’ (often unconscious) desires for a Latin American experience. As a program, we tried to resist
inadvertently reconfirming stereotypical images by avoiding delivering “packaged” visions of what a country’s reality is like. We did this by creating a more diverse, complex curriculum and by engaging students in discussions about how these seemingly disparate elements emerged and now “fit” together. We now take on student expectations that people in small towns wouldn’t wear American baseball caps, or that there wouldn’t be cable TV in the colonial homes, in such a way that encourages inquiry into the effects of these things, rather than simply bemoaning the arrival of global products and communication. To deplore the fact that a host-family is watching Friends or listening to Britney Spears is to miss the opportunity to explore how these media-created images of US culture, desires, economics, family life, etc., are being made sense of locally, and how they are mediate images of self and other. We also ask them to figure out how Meridenos are embracing certain aspects of US culture, such as Tommy Hilfiger clothes and American pop music, without actually becoming American.

Students can and should link on-going intellectual concerns more closely to their experiences abroad. Many previously-held ideas can now be complicated and reconsidered in the context of lived experience. For example, after a trip to the jungle that is disturbingly vacation-y in appearance (since there is no real middle-class option), instead of allowing this view of the tropics to be taken in as food for romanticizing, we ask students to analyze their presence and experience in the jungle. For many students, this challenges them to articulate new, less self-assured views as they look at a previous campus-constructed condemnation of tourism next to their own deep desires to see the jungle. They also examine media-informed preconceptions of what the jungle would look like next to what they actually observe while there. Similarly, after working in a brief service opportunity in a local NGO, students are asked whether or not a program should ethically engage in some sort of reciprocity, or if as temporary guests here, the very idea of this passing-through aid is insulting or inappropriate. In another volunteer project students engage in, they run into work styles that clash rather violently with their ideas about efficiency, organization, and use of time. Having them reflect on these cultural differences forces them to confront their own previous critiques of US society as too work-oriented, consumerist, cold-blooded, etc., as they experience an environment that emphasizes human relationships, learning versus producing, and other such qualities. They must reconsider their occasionally romantic evaluations of the “tranquilo” lifestyle in a work, rather than household, environment. Without direct analysis, experiences such as those mentioned here can be very empty intellectually and actually reinforce stereotypical ideas about Venezuela, even while bona fide immersion is taking place. Only when students engage experience head-on and re-think both their previously held views about major issues and their evolving ideas about Venezuela, do these experiences become true learning ones. By asking students tough questions (questions we ourselves may not have full answers to either), we challenge them to take more intellectual and social responsibility for the points of view they espouse.

Shor (1992) writes that a curriculum either promotes an unquestioning acceptance of a status quo, or challenges it. By being less concerned about showing students a solid answer to the question of what Mérida is all about, or who the Venezuelans really are, we can then help students resist jumping to quick, superficial judgements. We also employ a
more critical pedagogy where program staff members are not posed as experts full of cultural knowledge that can simply be passed on to students. When students finish the semester and cannot easily generalize about the experience because they have witnessed all different sorts of lives and conditions during a semester abroad, we see this as a very positive thing. This is infinitely better than to have a group leave smugly convinced that they know all there is to know about a given culture, that they have “mastered” Mérida, or, worse, that they have “done” Venezuela.

**Looking at our Mérida hosts: actors, not subjects**

Another area the program reexamined was the role of our hosts. Study abroad tends to assume benevolent local communities anxious to share their cultures and lives, yet while this is certainly not untrue in Venezuela, in that people are generally happy to get to know students, it is not quite as simple as the assumptions would have it. In Mérida, and I suspect in most urban (and perhaps rural) study abroad sites, people live busy lives and are not centered around these student-visitor. Furthermore, and more specific to Venezuela, tourism is decidedly not king here. For the student who arrives confused, with halting Spanish, fumbling with money and directions, there is often not the warm welcome he or she has imagined, or perhaps even experienced in other more vacation-oriented Latin American sites. Service can also be perceived as rather hostile, and this relates to the very low status accorded to service jobs, and to cultural issues that dictate warmth for family and intimate friends, and a much more reserved treatment for strangers. Even in the homestays, families need to get accustomed to having a new person in the house, and they exert themselves as “in charge” sometimes, underlining house rules and policies, although some of this comes from a program suggestion to do so.

People thus resist, sometimes openly, sometimes more subtly, to playing stereotypical roles as hosts, or as blanket Latin American objects of study. One of the first things students notice is that local Meridenos are not indigenous looking, and that many take great pains to underline their whiteness and their distance from rural roots of any ethnic character. Women also do not play the stereotypical role of abnegated, staunchly Catholic, subservient wives and mothers, and this too surprises students and challenges their views about both gender and religion. Indeed more than half of our host-families are headed by divorced mothers, most of whom work, and none of our families have more than two children. From data collected from a survey of other Latin American programs, it appears that few require a stay-at-home mom, which, in my opinion, takes a first important step towards dissipating some myths about Latin American women. While in the US, people are increasingly critical of normalized images of the nuclear family, on-site we are challenged to take this on when discussing what makes an “appropriate” host family. By hiring host-families that do not convey such idealized and false images, we resist perpetuating these stereotypical visions about Latin American families as well, even as we struggle to re-define how the hosting role will evolve in the Venezuela program.

Another way host-culture members in Venezuela do not conform to ideas and “behave” is by taking surprising political positions. University lecturers quite frequently criticize
populist President Chávez – they do not always play the role of anti-US imperialism, anti-IMF policies, etc. that students expect them to, and they are very willing to back up their views with data, experiences, anecdotes and the like. Nor do hosts always display the assumed nationalism students expect. Many lecturers and host-family members are quick to criticize Venezuelans as lazy and apathetic, anxious to gain money without working. Many also apologize for the lack of a splendid indigenous past that could parallel the Incan, Aztecan or Mayan heritage of other Latin American nations. This jars students, often producing uncomfortable moments during lectures, as they think about their expectations of nationalism and cultural pride here, even as they value such self-criticism when it occurs in US society at home.

Hosts in Venezuela, and probably in much of Latin America, are also increasingly mobile. Many of our families have moved to Mérida from elsewhere, and some have traveled out of the country. For example, one of our most traditional artisan contacts who fulfills all expectations of tradition and “local-ness” (dilapidated house, no schooling, no car, “naïve” art) travels regularly to Miami, where much of his family now lives. Stephenson (1999), in her survey of 56 Chilean host-families (mostly host-mothers), found that 20% of them had lived outside of Chile at one point. In other places families probably have migrant histories or family members that currently live in the US. This changes the whole nature of the playing field as hosts too become international travelers (no matter what the economic and immigration status), because it erodes some of the opposition between mobile-traveling-student versus static-unchanging-host. The roles of explorer-discover are not always one-way only anymore. These previous experiences with cultural others will also affect how host-culture members perceive and relate to students.

We all know our hosts are not faceless, agenda-less props on the study abroad stage. Indeed, they are the key actors and mediators in the created space of student interactions with the local field site. This consciousness, while obvious to anyone in the field, and even to most in the States, is still not centered in most work about study abroad, and must be drawn out and made more visible. This is one area the Venezuela program is still working on – not only do we want to “see” hosts more clearly, but we are also asking how we more truly center our hosts as teachers of our students. Can we make more places within the curriculum for high quality interactions with hosts? Incorporate locals in discussions and activities, not only with students, but also with staff to gain their input into what a program should show of their community, what sorts of learning they hope to see occur, and other such things? These are rich areas for further work that would push us to back up many well-meant assertions of host-families’ and other locals’ importance and right to respect.

Students as individuals with complex desires and diverse identities
In Venezuela we of course “know” our students, but there are a range of questions that we began to think about with respect to their identities, although it took awhile to see this need. My first year or so I perceived cultural difference only in the Mérida hosts, with a true anthropological bias of only seeing difference at a distance. It became increasingly clear, however, that students are often separated from staff by age/generation, gender,
nationality, ethnicity, values and worldviews, and that perhaps their perceptions of what this experience looked like or could be, might differ from staff/home institution assumptions. Because we hope to open up students’ minds and enlist them in some sort of project that leads to positive change, we must consider who they are and within what cultural terms they have formed their existing views of and desires for the study abroad experience.

In much of the study abroad literature, students are portrayed as a fairly homogeneous group with little attention given yet to how gender, ethnicity, class, goals and other factors shape an individual’s study abroad experience (Twombly, 1996; Talburt and Stewart, 1999). In Venezuela, students have come from an incredibly diverse range of ethnic and national backgrounds, not to mention political, sexual, and class orientations, which blurs their incoming position as generic American “self” to be held up against a Venezuelan “Other.” Students know this, and in their writings and discussion lie our points of departure for understanding the effects of ethnicity and other factors. Some find that they feel more American than ever before, lumped into the group of gringo students that stands out in relief against the Venezuelan backdrop. Others, however, find that they are more easily accepted for a given ethnic background, and still others, suffer more a more conflictual integration here because of race or other identity markers. How students expect to be received here, how they shape their own decisions and actions as they interact with Venezuelans, and how they are actually incorporated here, all play into the nature of each individual’s experience. The encounter with a cultural Venezuelan Other is still a very real one, but one that is increasingly less exotic (when students are already living multicultural lives) and more complex (since there is so much differentiation between individual experiences).

Similarly student desires for the semester also shape the ways in which they approach and make meaning from interactions with host culture members. For example, our students commonly talk about the boredom of small campus life and the stress of attending competitive schools. Such desires could lead study abroad students to want to break their own rules, and to engage in wildly inappropriate behavior as an escape from the pressures of home. They may inadvertently play out negative, even exploitative roles (such as the Ugly American, the cheap gringo) or seek out stereotyped encounters (with

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4 Another area warranting more attention is the role of the peer group (i.e. other student participants) in the individual’s process. In the survey with program directors, many asserted that that the single most important thing a program could do to improve the study abroad experience was to free students from their own peer group, to “get them away from the other gringos.” They found that being in a group leads to insularity, too much English usage, and detracts from the learning and immersion. A group can also reconfirm that difference is weird or wrong. On the Venezuela program, however, we have found that the peer group provides an important learning community to the individual, and serves as a forum in which to process, make sense of, and compare and contrast their experiences, which keeps them from generalizing so easily. Being in the group tends to increase students’ awareness of their American-ness and permits discussion of home culture in juxtaposition to the foreign one. And finally, the group also serves as a key place to practice tolerance and open-mindedness, since groups are not chosen but rather random and diverse. This provides students with a good way to connect what they are learning in the foreign setting to later applications at home, which is one of our most vital concerns.

5 Like tourists, some feel that being abroad makes one unaccountable for one’s actions, as if the local people either do not see them or are somehow unable to perceive, interpret and think about them.
“Latin lover” boy/girlfriends, or a selfless hostmother who caters to the student). But this hunger for excitement doesn’t have to be expressed in such negative terms. Ira Shor finds American students “starved for meaningful contexts, for intellectual and emotional pleasures in the life of the mind, for holistic learning that feeds their own understanding” (1992: 83). In Venezuela, we sensed that our students, similarly, needed something that stimulated their minds and that gave them hope about the future and their own ability to make a difference. By looking more deeply into students’ lives and eliciting more input from them, we have heard desires for such things as opportunities for creative expression, deep relationships with their host families, new perspectives on spirituality and the work/family balance, and increased self-knowledge and confidence. Knowing what students expect, want, need and hope for in the study abroad experience is vital information for facilitators, and these desires, if understood empathetically, can then be channeled into positive, even empowering directions.

Students do not all bring the same life experiences, goals, needs and desires to the study abroad experience. More work understanding this particular generation of students - perhaps via general readings, especially in higher education, or via contact with home campuses (perhaps with campus life or student affairs offices) – would be useful for on-site staff. Work throughout the study abroad experience with the students themselves can also keep staff more clear on what this experience looks like from the student perspective, which can be checked against program objectives and expectations. This information, in turn, would not only enlighten on-site practice, but also offer very relevant information to home offices as well.

**Staff and the myth of invisible facilitation**

The last area that we began to unpack was our own facilitation of the program. To date, the literature on study abroad has not examined in depth how individual facilitators shape a study abroad experience. Indeed, many articles are written in such a way that the resident director, professor or program leader appears invisible. As staff, we must look at the “multiple ways we are positioned in the field” (Amory, Gupta, 1997: 103). We are White US citizens, Latino citizens and residents, Latin Americans, Canadians, African-Americans, non-New World citizens, biculturals and bi-nationals, etc., etc. We are women and men, administrators and academics, anthropologists, linguists, political scientists, and the like. This leads one to ask a range of questions about how identity inscribes our facilitation of study abroad programs. Dennis, who wrote about his experiences directing study abroad programs in Costa Rica, is one of the few who has pondered some of these issues. He writes, “the director’s ethnicity was probably an important, although little discussed factor in how the program operated” (1994: 303). He described his experiences managing a student accident, speculating on how his cultural bond with the student worked to alleviate her and her parents’ stress, while his local staff’s position as natives permitted them to more easily interpret and manage issues related to seeking care.

It occurred to me that a Latin American director, equally bilingual in English and Spanish, might have had a different sort of relationship with US students in general. The comfort of sharing cultural background and a mother tongue might
have been missed. On the other hand, a Latin American director might have had a more intuitive understanding of how to get things done in Costa Rica, and served as a better role model for students adapting to the local culture (303).

This is a fascinating discussion. How do our worldviews, upbringing, approach to education, previous study abroad experiences, gender, ethnicity and other factors mark us as educators? How do they affect our decision-making process on site (whether logistical, academic or otherwise)? What sort of agenda do we bring to the study abroad experience in Latin America? Our staff engaged in much discussion about our own previous immersion experiences, our political views, our concerns about study abroad in Latin America, the way we valued learning, etc., and as a result, we were able to re-think many facilitating issues. In some cases, we formed stronger more articulate views that were then made shareable with students. In other cases, we realized that our own experiences did not always offer the most appropriate model for these particular students on this particular sort of program, and we were able to un-do some previous biases that had informed our facilitating.

This reflexive task could be extended to programs as a whole as well. For example, when the program first began searching for host-families in Mérida, we heard terrible stories about several incidents at one of the major language institutes in the city. We then juxtaposed the Venezuela program in reference to this, underlining how much more respectful, interested, etc. our own students were, and how much more concerned our staff was about possible negative impacts. We did this both as a defensive strategy (“don’t worry, our students won’t cause you these sorts of problems”) and as an offensive one (“unlike those in school x, our students are seeking to immerse themselves fully into your lives; they want to abide by your household rules”), and so forth. Positioning ourselves against some negative local feelings, however, was not a productive thing to do. One cannot work in isolation to fight at negative stereotypes and dangerous/prejudiced/close-minded encounters, and we cannot create a program that somehow functions independently of the larger construction of interactions between locals and other Americans in Mérida. To date, there is not much exchange between those involved in international education here in Mérida even though we visit similar sites, hire the same lecturers from the university, and sometimes hire each others’ ex-host-families. Nonetheless, this could certainly be envisioned as an important site for action.

Results of all this complicating – was the experience was enlarged and emancipated?

This paper reflects an attempt to challenge on-going notions about study abroad in Venezuela, specifically, and in Latin America in general. It has tried to shake things up and to pose questions that often do not have easy answers. But the goal is firmly oriented towards improving practice from within. On-site, in the Venezuela program, the study

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In other places, this sort of work has already been started, for example, in Chile (Stephenson, personal communication), study abroad program organizers are meeting twice a semester to discuss safety issues and other questions. They have formed a working group with the mission to share information, confer on policies and possibilities for group action, and, significantly, to “demonstrate to the home institutions the quality of our study abroad programs and the seriousness of purpose.” Work like this could do much to professionalize this endeavor, help improve practice, and expand communication in new directions.
abroad experience has indeed been enlarged. The level of discussion among staff and others in situ has gone up, more importance has been lent to the overall endeavor, and more critical attention has been paid to everyone’s roles in creating and facilitating this experience. Students too have been explicitly encouraged to see this experience in larger personal and social terms, and we have successfully shared our concerns about engaging in study abroad in Latin America with them.

The experience has also been emancipated, or at least set on the road to emancipation, because since engaging in this re-thinking, the program has been enacted in a more intentional, cautious way. Specifically, this work led to major pedagogical changes within the program, although it is not in the scope of this paper to cover this subsequent phase. The program pushed its experiential base to a deeper level, and also began incorporating many strategies from critical pedagogy. While the results appear subtle, in that the program on paper appears to be roughly the same as before, the results are also occasionally very grand, as we see how student writing, thinking and acting is transformed over the course of a given semester. Students also link this experience to ongoing issues at home, larger global questions, and, most importantly, to their own futures. Effectively, the program is no longer an experience in a bubble that is unconnected to life before and life after, nor is it remembered by the majority of our students as simply a fun time, or a way to get a useful skill onto the résumé. A good many Venezuela students go on to study more about Latin America, to take more language classes, to work in local Spanish-speaking communities at home, to maintain contact with the host-families, and to plan future jobs that build upon the intercultural skills they have developed in Venezuela.

Final suggestions for practice
This paper has offered some tentative suggestions about how to take a more critical look at study abroad practice in Latin America. To summarize, a few final suggestions for connecting this experience to other levels and liberating it from more colonial or oppressive practices are posited below.

1. There is a need to reflect upon our practice if we hope to professionalize this work and get beyond the easy-A, tequila-and-salsa image that still plagues us. Such reflexive work, whether done institutionally or individually, (or ideally both), would effectively raise consciousness, helping us 1) to better define our goals as a field; and 2) to critically question the motivations and effects of our practice.

2. This could take the form of fieldwork among our own students and among locals, and perhaps most importantly, in that space created by their intersection. Only then can we deeply understand what boundaries still exist in these intercultural relationships and work to break them open. More participatory work with local hosts could also yield interesting and innovative data about how we could envision (and evaluate) study abroad programs.

3. This knowledge must then be disseminated. A crucial strategy towards decolonialization is to encourage more writing and discussion from the field that
reflects both our own and the other less heard voices of host-culture members involved with study abroad programs. We should produce more testimonies of our own experiences; we need to document how these encounters work or fail to work as we reinvent our practice. In the informal survey of Latin American program directors, 100% agreed that that we have a responsibility to prepare students for this experience, and many raised concerns about some of the less successful encounters they have witnessed. By sharing experiences, both the good and the bad, and dialoguing about how these encounters play out and impact all involved, we can begin to build more knowledge about them that will help us improve our facilitation of future interactions between students and Latin American communities.

4. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we must recognize the inequalities inherent in study abroad in Latin America and act to change these at different levels. My opinion is that to do this work in Latin America, is highly political. While much of the intercultural literature focuses on the potential for growth and both personal and intellectual transformation on the part of the student, we must consider what is happening at a larger level. What do students do with these experiences? Do they go home and take action in some personal or public way? Does it change the way they vote, interact with others, view immigrants, learn languages, make career choices, plan to educate their own children? We hope we are changing and expanding the ideas of the next generation, but need to be more explicit about this and investigate whether or not we are succeeding.

Conclusion
Marginalized when we gaze north of the border and demonized when we gaze out south-locally, study abroad programs in Latin America need to resist these polarized images of our practice. This paper has tried to take a first step towards complicating some conceptualizations and assumptions about study abroad in Venezuela. It has tried to show that programs are not formed “naturally,” but rather, that they are heavily inscribed with media-influenced conceptualizations of place, the desires of home institutions, students and hosts, and our own hopes and doubts as identified facilitators. By examining what sorts of things shape and constrain the study abroad experience, programs can then move to the next task of working from within to resist existing power imbalances and transform on-site practice. There are infinite areas of study abroad in Latin America that call for more investigation, and only by examining carefully what we do, can we assert that study abroad in Latin America is a truly educational enterprise that contributes, however modestly, to positive social change.
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