

## Impromptu Learning: Unplanned Occurrences, Intended Outcomes

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During a study abroad experience on the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, participants found themselves in an “impromptu learning experience” that extended their learning beyond Puerto Rican culture to real-world debates of tourist development, environmental issues, and the struggles of the native population. In this paper, we introduce impromptu learning: an unplanned experiential learning experience, triggered by a significant and personalized incident, that engages, invigorates, and mobilizes students to seek further learning and knowledge. We used qualitative data in the form of interviews and students’ journals to describe and elucidate the characteristics of impromptu learning. Implications of these experiences and their potential for making study abroad as well as learning in other contexts more student-led and more effective for critical consciousness are discussed. In addition, recommendations for supporting and promoting impromptu learning experiences are provided.

*No me regalen más libros  
porque no los leo.  
Lo que he aprendiedo,  
es porque lo veo.*

Don’t give me any more books  
Because I don’t read them.  
Everything I know  
Is because I’ve seen it.  
(Joglar, 2010; the song “La Vuelta al Mundo”/“Around the World,” performed by Calle 13)

An important goal in teaching is to transform the learning experience for students and to transform the students themselves (Mezirow, 1997). That is, teachers strive to encourage and challenge students to engage deeply in course material, to step outside their comfort zones and become receptive to novel ideas and multiple perspectives, and ultimately, to direct their own learning and seek further knowledge. Therefore, it is not surprising that many teachers have embraced and integrated experiential learning, whereby students acquire knowledge through new experiences and observations (Kolb, 1984), into their lesson plans. However, the most powerful learning experiences cannot be planned; they occur serendipitously. These impromptu learning experiences allow students to expand their horizons and become empathic, conscious global citizens. Although when and how these experiences occur cannot be controlled, teachers can capitalize on them and maximize their learning benefits by providing students with freedom to explore, opportunities to reflect, and tools to further understand their experiences. In this paper, we expand on the experiential learning literature by introducing the concept of *impromptu learning* and its potential for making higher education more student-led and more effective for critical consciousness. We illustrate this concept with a study-abroad incident and offer

recommendations for supporting and promoting impromptu learning experiences.

According to Freire (1997), the goal of education is to achieve “critical consciousness” which involves “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 8). Unfortunately, classroom spaces, due to their scripted nature, the onset of assessment and standards, and the vertical relationship with teachers and students, tend to reproduce what Freire (1997) described as the opposite of critical consciousness, or “the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or *with* others; the individual is a spectator, not re-creator” (p. 56). The problems and challenges presented in a classroom environment do not seem urgent or personal, and the high degree of abstractness makes it difficult for students to relate to the material.

Based on works by Paulo Freire and other scholars, such as Kurt Lewin and John Dewey, Kolb (1984) developed *experiential learning* theory, proposing learning as a process whereby the learner encounters multiple and often contradictory perspectives from interacting with the environment, leading him/her to refine original beliefs and develop new ones. Because experiences coupled with reflections lead to better critical thinking skills, deeper processing, and longer retention of information, experiential activities have been incorporated into many lesson plans and academic programs (Wehbi, 2011). In the past few decades, learner-focused and experience-based education, such as service learning, simulation exercises, role plays, collaborative learning, internships, and field work, have surged in popularity (Cramer, Ryosho, & Nguyen, 2012; Wehbi, 2011). Experiential learning opportunities are usually formal, planned, intentional, and/or prescriptive. For example, students participating in internships or service-learning projects may be instructed to volunteer at an organization or in the community for a set amount of time and to document their experiences and

observations in a journal or diary (e.g., Craig, 2010; Mealman, 1993). The learning that occurs is predetermined, structured, and institutionalized (Eneroth, 2008; Malcolm, Hodkinson, & Colley, 2003; Williams, Karousou, & Mackness, 2011).

In addition to these formal means, experiential learning (i.e., learning through experience) may also be informal, unplanned, unintentional, unstructured, incidental, and/or accidental. *Informal* or *unplanned learning* is learning through everyday life rather than in a structured educational setting from a formal teacher with pre-specified learning objectives (Bourner, 2009; Eneroth, 2008; Jurasaitė-Harbison, 2009; Malcolm, Hodkinson, & Colley, 2003). For example, informal learning may occur through casual conversations with peers. At a more specific level, *incidental learning* is informal, unintentional learning from an event or incident (Kerka, 2000; Mealman, 1993). That is, an event may have the purpose of acquiring knowledge of topic A, but the learner also accidentally acquires knowledge about topic B. Examples include learning by making a mistake or learning through networking. Incidental learning is related to learners' improved mastery of material, interpersonal relationships, self-confidence, and self-awareness (Kerka, 2000; Mealman, 1993).

### Impromptu Learning

Current conceptualizations of experiential, informal, or incidental learning do not capture the emergent or transformative learning that occurs from frequent and open opportunities to interact with other people and the environment, especially in the context of study abroad programs. To address this theoretical gap, we propose a specific type of incidental learning that is triggered by a significant and personalized event and serves as a catalyst for further learning: impromptu learning. (See Figure 1 for the placement of impromptu learning within the context of incidental, informal, and experiential learning, and Figure 2 for an illustration of the impromptu learning process.) The triggering event must be "significant" in that it shatters and changes the learner's original worldview. In other words, it shifts the learner's perspective and provides the learner with an epiphany. This event may be considered a disorienting dilemma, which is a crucial step in the process toward critical consciousness (Freire, 1997) or perspective transformation (Taylor, 1997). The triggering event must also be "personalized," such that it engages the learner, forcing him/her to adopt a perspective and have an opinion.

Figure 1  
*Impromptu Learning as a Specific Form of Incidental, Informal, Experiential Learning*

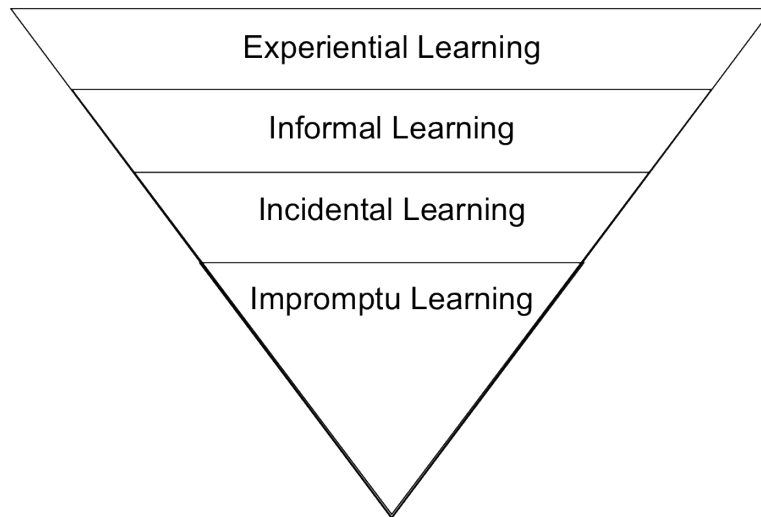
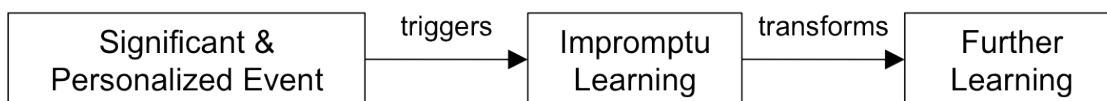


Figure 2  
*Impromptu Learning Process*



The effect of impromptu learning is that it transforms the learning experience; it engages, invigorates, and mobilizes the learner. The impromptu learning experience engages the learner by becoming a part of him/her, pre-occupying his/her thoughts and showing up in conversations in and out of class. Consequently, the learner is invigorated, with a renewed interest in learning. Finally, with this surge of interest and enthusiasm, the learner uses the impromptu learning experience as a focus or point of departure from which future learning and interactions occur. In other words, impromptu learning experiences motivate further learning, with the learner seeking knowledge and information from a variety of sources: teachers, peers, observers, and strangers.

Drawing on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997)—both of which were heavily influenced by Freire (1997)—a key element of impromptu learning is critical reflection, whereby the learner becomes aware of and evaluates his/her thoughts, ideas, and assumptions. As a form of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), the catalyst for impromptu learning is experience, or more specifically, a significant and personalized triggering event. As a form of transformative learning (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1997; Taylor, 1997), there is a change in the learner's frame of reference or meaning perspective. However, with impromptu learning, the perspective that is altered is specific to the learner's attitudes toward the process of learning itself.

Impromptu learning can occur any time a student steps outside the four walls of a classroom and into an unfamiliar situation in which he/she fully interacts with others and the surroundings. In other words, impromptu learning may happen every time a student ventures outside his/her comfort zone and participates in a community to which he/she does not belong. These impromptu learning experiences may even arise during more traditional experiential learning activities such as internships, field experiences and service learning opportunities. It is important to note that in some cases, impromptu learning can also occur within the classroom via conversations, interactions and demonstrations (see Longfield, 2009). Moreover, everyday life in a student's hometown can potentially give rise to impromptu learning. As such, impromptu learning is relevant and applicable to a wide range of disciplines, from humanities and the social sciences to mathematics and the natural sciences. The key is to encourage students to always be learners, and to have open ears, eyes, and mind.

One of the most ideal—albeit not the only—fertile environment for impromptu learning is study abroad. Study abroad can provide many opportunities for impromptu learning, allowing students to observe novel

occurrences, reflect on these observations, and process them in formal and informal ways. When living abroad, students may encounter different cultural norms, values, and behaviors throughout each day. These new and different situations offer prime opportunities for students to learn in an unstructured, unrestricted, and independent way. For example, walking through early morning markets may allow students to learn about relations-based economic systems, gender roles in the household, and class inequalities. Many of the experiences are unsettling, making students uncomfortable and causing them confusion, which is “an ideal state for learning” (Savicki, 2008, p. 4). This confusion is similar to the concepts of Piaget's cognitive disequilibrium or cognitive conflict (as cited in Longfield, 2009) and cognitive dissonance (Elliot & Devine, 1994; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959), whereby learners are motivated to change a perspective or adopt a new attitude after being confronted with opposing or discrepant ideas. Aware of these benefits, higher education institutions are investing more in study abroad programs: they benefit students personally, emotionally, academically and professionally. For example, those who studied abroad had increased international awareness, international political concern, cross-cultural interest, cultural cosmopolitanism, prosocial attitudes, empathy, and personal growth (e.g., Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Ryan & Twibell, 2000; Tremethick & Smit, 2009).

#### **Illustration of Impromptu Learning: Study Abroad in Vieques, Puerto Rico**

To further explain the concept of impromptu learning, we will describe an impromptu learning experience at Bio Bay in Vieques, Puerto Rico, for students in the Caribbean Studies Summer Institute (Capetillo & Galanes, 2011). Although undergraduate students may be well-versed theoretically in concepts such as neocolonialism, tourist development, and environmental protection, impromptu learning experiences expose them to real-life, “on the ground” examples of these abstract concepts, providing them a deeper understanding of these complex issues. The impromptu learning experience at Bio Bay highlighted for students the complicated relationship between tourism and the local population.

#### **Caribbean Studies Summer Institute**

The Caribbean Studies Summer Institute was developed by the University of Massachusetts, in partnership with the University of Puerto Rico at Cayey and California State University, Fullerton, to help students to understand the socio-political, economic, and cultural dynamics of the Caribbean (e.g., Puerto

Rico, St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John). It offers students an interdisciplinary (sociological and anthropological) approach to understanding Caribbean societies and cultures “where emphasis is placed on the idea of the Caribbean as a natural laboratory of cultural and ethnic diversity, and the study of the historical, socio-political and economic structures and processes that helped shape the Caribbean as such” (Capetillo & Galanes, 2011, p. 2). It combines class lectures, local guest lecturers, field trips, and daily opportunities to interact with locals. Additionally, students’ encounter cross-cultural differences among themselves because program participants come from different regions of the US and Puerto Rico.

### **Vieques, Puerto Rico**

The physical location of the Caribbean Studies Summer Institute varied from week to week (or even day to day), but the most memorable week was spent on Vieques. Vieques is a small island that is 21 miles long and 4 miles wide, consisting of 33,000 acres (roughly twice the size of Manhattan, NY) and approximately 10,000 inhabitants (*viequenses*), thus earning it the nickname of *La Isla Nena* (Cruz Soto, 2008; García Muñiz, 2001; McCaffrey, 2006). With 65% of the population living in poverty, Vieques is one of the poorest municipalities of Puerto Rico, which is a non-sovereign territory of the US, whose inhabitants are US citizens and can serve in the armed forces, but do not have representation in Congress and cannot vote for president (McCaffrey, 2011). As such, Vieques is also known as *la colonia de la colonia*, or “the colony of the colony” (Grusky, 1992).

Although many tourists know Vieques for its pristine beaches, untouched by modernization and industrialization, few are aware of the historical tension between the U.S. Navy and locals, or the toxic contamination of land and water, and consequently, the alarming cancer rate on the island (i.e., 27% higher than that of the Puerto Rican mainland; McCaffrey, 2002). In the 1940s, the U.S. Navy occupied the western and eastern ends of the island, displacing many *viequenses* from their homes and forcing them to move to the center of the island. After decades of the Naval military exercises, including “artillery and small arms firing, naval gunfire support, and missile shoots” (McCaffrey, 2002, p. 14), “contamination from heavy metals and other toxins pose major environmental and health concerns” (McCaffrey, 2009, p. 35). In addition to increased rates of cancer, *viequenses* also suffer from higher rates of asthma, skin conditions, kidney failure, vibro-acoustical cardiovascular disease, and infant mortality (Baver, 2006; García Muñiz, 2001). These issues led to a *viequense* uprising, which became more heated after April 1999, when a Navy jet mistakenly

bombed a military observation post, killing David Sanes Rodriguez, a civilian employee and native of the island (Baver, 2006; McCaffrey, 2006). These mass protests successfully resulted in the Navy’s departure in 2003, but many of the *viequenses*’ problems still persist.

### **Bio-Bay Incident**

While on Vieques, students listened to guest lectures from local leaders, discussed academic readings, wrote journals and papers, visited art exhibitions, watched documentaries, participated in guided tours of the island, and interacted with *viequenses*, but nothing was as powerful in teaching students about the socio-political, economic, and cultural milieu of Vieques as an incident at Bio Bay. Bio Bay (officially known as Mosquito Bay) is a bioluminescent bay, a natural national landmark, and a major tourist attraction. Due to its popularity, the Caribbean Studies Summer Institute arranged annual Bio Bay excursions with *viequenses* who had established informal businesses as tour guides. In 2012, however, students had a different experience than in prior years, triggering an impromptu learning experience.

When students arrived with kayaks, an officer of the Departamento de Recursos Naturales y Ambientales (DRNA; Department of Natural Resources and Environment) intercepted their entry into Bio Bay. This officer, a *viequense*, demanded that the *viequense* tour guides show a permit authorizing them to bring tourists to the Bay. When the tour guides did not provide one, the DRNA officer cited them for breaking the law. What ensued was a heated confrontation between the officer and the tour guides, one that the students were able to experience up-close and one that they would not soon forget. This incident impressed strongly upon the students, prompting debates about the meaning of this event among themselves, with professors, and with locals. They wrote about it in their journals and as part of their term papers. Using this incident, we define impromptu learning experiences and their potential for transformative learning, drawing implications for understanding the learning that can happen from formal or informal experiential pedagogy.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

There were 16 students enrolled in the Caribbean Summer Studies Institute. Of these, 15 agreed to participate in the study: 13 students from across the US (Boston, MA; Los Angeles, CA; Dallas, TX; New York, NY) and two students from Puerto Rico. The

sample was 80% female, with an average age of 22.54 ( $SD = 2.57$ ). Racially and/or ethnically, the sample was comprised of two Cape Verdean Americans, one Haitian American, one Caribbean (from Martinique), five Latino(a)s, two Puerto Ricans, one Dominican, one Salvadoran, one Colombian/Panamanian, one Asian/Pacific Islander American (Korean American), and five White/Anglo Americans (of Italian, Irish, or mixed ethnic origin).

### Data Collection

Using an ethnographic methodology (Brewer, 2000), the first author gathered data during the daily routines and events of the Caribbean Studies Summer Institute in June 2012. By focusing on the “social meanings and ordinary activities” of participants in “naturally occurring settings” (Brewer, 2000, p. 9), the first author attempted to describe a more personal and in-depth portrait of the participants during their study abroad experience. Three types of triangulation were used in order to ensure that the account is robust, rich and comprehensive: methods triangulation, triangulation of sources and analyst triangulation (Patton, 2000). For the data collection, methods triangulation was used, as data was gathered by different methods such as participant observation, interviews and journals.

**Participant observation.** The role of the first author in the Caribbean Studies Summer Institute allowed him to observe and participate in activities with students, such as residing among them in hotels and dorms, sharing in meals, and driving them on field trips. The data reported here are from his second year acting as a coordinator of activities, instructor and curriculum developer. This level of involvement allowed him as a participant observer to “collect and record data as needed” and “obtain feedback about observations and tentative conclusions from the people in the research study” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 209). The first author’s role was that of an intervening participant who engaged in dialogue with participants; thus, data collection was shaped by his identities and personal history: a English-Spanish bilingual White Latino from Argentina, who had lived in the US for 15 years and had visited the Caribbean five times. Because the first author did not accompany students to Bio Bay, much of the participant observer data was gathered after the incident. Starting the night that student returned from Bio Bay and throughout the subsequent weeks, the first author overheard students discuss the event and give different interpretations of what happened. He sometimes participated in these discussions, either one-on-one with students or in groups, but rarely with all the students at the same time. He recorded the content of these conversations in detailed field notes.

**Student interviews.** During the last week of the program, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with individual students. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, during which he asked students to reflect on how learning via experiences during the program differed from classroom learning, what surprised them the most about the study abroad experience and which experience they remember most vividly. In the first round of interviews, 12 of 15 students talked about the incident at Bio Bay as the most significant example of learning that had occurred outside of the classroom, prompting the first author to ask follow-up questions regarding the students’ interpretations of the event; their discussions with peers, locals, and faculty members after the event; and the impact of this event on the rest of their trip. In a second round of interviews that occurred after participants had returned from the program and after having conducted preliminary analysis of the data, the first author asked follow-up questions about issues that he had noticed in the first interview. In this way, the methodology of this study is grounded in participants’ own words and experiences. However, to protect participants’ confidentiality, their names were modified.

**Student journals.** As an assignment for one of program courses, students wrote journal entries on experiences that they found novel, surprising, and/or interesting. In these entries, students were encouraged to describe the situation they observed, reflect on it, and give an interpretation of the event in light of the readings and theoretical frameworks given in the reading. These journals were collected and analyzed at the end of the program.

### Data Analysis.

To analyze the data, the authors read the data sources and recorded themes that emerged across participants. Due to the number of students who mentioned the incident and the energy and enthusiasm generated by it, the authors decided to focus on the Bio Bay incident and its pedagogical significance. From the content analysis of these data, codes emerged regarding the consequences of students’ experiences at Bio Bay: the ways in which it engaged them, invigorated their learning, and mobilized them for future learning. Thus, the authors that there was a new type of learning experience not yet conceptualized in pedagogical and research literature.

The data analysis was triangulated in three ways: methods triangulation, triangulation of sources and analyst triangulation (Patton, 2000). In the first, authors checked the consistency of findings through participant observation notes, interviews and journals. Second, the researchers examined the consistency of data sources at

different points in time during the program. For example, the students' impressions of the Bio Bay experience were analyzed a day after the experience (in participant observation notes), 2 weeks after (in interviews) and a month later (in her journal). For analyst triangulation, both authors analyzed and discussed the creation of codes and themes.

### Results and Discussion

From the data collected, we were able to identify the characteristics of impromptu learning as: (a) caused by a significant and personalized event, (b) engaging students, (c) invigorating them, and (d) mobilizing them to organically seek further learning and knowledge, making the curriculum learner-focused and student-led.

#### Significant and Personalized Triggering Event

Impromptu learning is spontaneous, serendipitous, on-the-spot learning that is most likely to occur when learners are faced with new, messy, complex and challenging situations or situations filled with conflicts and differences. During study abroad experiences such as this one, students may encounter many informal and incidental learning experiences, as they observe the practices, behaviors and situations that are foreign or novel to them. Impromptu learning experiences, however, occur when those situations are significant and personal for students. Because what transpired between the tour guides and the DRNA officer affected students' access and ability to enjoy the natural wonder of Bio Bay, they could not ignore this event. In the words of a student, the Bio Bay incident was "the most shocking. If you were there, you couldn't help [but] pay attention to this, this massive conflict that arose very quickly, organically" (Alex, male, Caucasian, 25 years old).

Many students are law-abiding, conceding power and the determination of right vs. wrong to authority figures, such as government officials. This event was significant in that it turned students' world upside-down, forcing them to at least consider the tour guides' perspective because they were after all, in the tour guides' vans. After considering both perspectives, students had to take a side: Would they side with the tour guide, a local breaking the law to try to make a living from showing the island's beauty? Or would they side with the government official, imposing restrictions for the sake of the environment and selectively limiting the number of tour agencies into Bio Bay? The impact of this impromptu learning experience was evident in the remaining weeks of the study abroad program, changing and transforming the way students learned.

#### Transformation by Engaging Students

The Bio Bay encounter between the DRNA officer and the tour guides had the power to more deeply engage students in course material, thus transforming their learning experience. Prior classroom discussions and lectures about the effect of both the U.S. Navy and tourist development on Vieques had theoretically introduced students to concepts of neo-colonialism and development, but this event played a role in personally engaging students in the issue. It gave the topic a sense of urgency that it had never had before, making the problems of economic development, unemployment, and access to resources in Vieques one that students embraced as their own. Impromptu learning serves to make material more real to students, allowing them to understand and interpret previously learned "book material" with a new perspective.

That's [the Bio Bay event] one of the examples of these kind things that you don't plan, but they stick with people—people's head—so much more than reading it in an article. How often do you remember the stories in a newspaper or everything you've read about something exactly like this from a week ago? . . . But I'm pretty sure that I'll never forget that. (Alex)

Through the event at the Bio Bay, students witnessed first-hand the themes discussed in the Caribbean Studies Summer Institute: neo-colonialism, tourism, and capitalism in the Caribbean. As a participant observer, the first author noticed how the theme of economic development, tourism, and the relationship between locals and tourist development became topics of heated debate during the remainder of the study abroad program. Students went from being interested in the issue from an outsider perspective to being thrust into the middle of the topic: having to take sides, convincing other people of their position and trying to change other students' opinions about the issue, searching for more information about the issue and making parallels between that situation and other situations.

#### Transformation by Invigorating Students

The Bio Bay incident energized students and made them excited to learn. The transformative nature of this impromptu learning experience is most evident in Sandra. Initially, she perceived tourism in the Caribbean to be a beneficial and important service to the people and economies in the region, but after the Bio Bay incident, Sandra began to empathize with the locals and see the world through their eyes, while also understanding the need for environmental regulation and environmental protection.

During student-initiated conversations after the Bio Bay incident, some viequeses explained that they had tried to obtain licenses, but the licenses were extremely expensive, and the bureaucratic process to obtain them was difficult to maneuver. Sandra wanted to determine exactly how difficult or expensive it is for the residents to obtain a permit because the regulation of Bio Bay was important to her. She wanted to suspend judgment of the event until she found out more information about obtaining licenses:

I'm really encouraged to see how hard it is, and if it's expensive to get a permit. It's like a driver's license. It's a free country, and yes, you have feelings, but we still want you to, whether or not you're capable of driving a car, they still want you to go get a license. (Sandra, female, Caucasian, 22 years old)

Later in the interview, Sandra mentioned that she understood the perspective of the DRNA:

They are trying to protect [the Bio Bay]. It's been very effective for tourism; that's one of the main tourist attractions, so I could see how they want to keep that. With more access, it'd be more, I think motor boats are the biggest [issue]. Those engines turn up the water, and it kills a lot of things, so I understand. (Sandra)

As time progressed, Sandra's stance shifted to embrace both parties' perspectives, as written in this final assignment:

I believe that the DRNA should be concerned about the chance of the bioluminescent bay fading, but they are doing it the wrong way. They should be more concerned with people going out on it with motor boats which can bring direct harm to the bay, not a group of locally led tourists on kayaks. In the big picture, I believe that the Puerto Rico DRNA's goal of protecting the bay is a great plan, I just do not think that they are doing it in the right way and keep the locals and the tourists happy. (Sandra)

Sandra finds a way to reconcile the need for tourism for its economic benefits, the need to protect the bay, and the needs of the locals. In addition to renewing students' interest in learning, impromptu learning experiences also provides a point of departure for students to organize and direct their own learning.

### **Transformation by Mobilizing Students toward Further Learning**

The most important transformational effect of impromptu learning is that it mobilizes and motivates

students to acquire further knowledge. The Bio Bay incident provided students with a framework through which to seek out and interpret their experiences during the remaining weeks of the Caribbean Summer Studies Institute. In these weeks, students became receptive to and acquainted with locals' perspectives, noticing and becoming interested in locals' opinions, initiating informal conversations with them, and developing their independent study projects from the locals' point of view.

For some students, the Bio Bay impromptu learning experience stimulated a desire to focus on tourism and capitalism for their independent study projects. One student noted:

I wanted to do something about American tourism companies, and how it's negative to the natives. A lot of the natives feel the way they do in terms of American tourists and how [tourists] treat them: how [tourists] ask you if they can . . . come for a few days [to] vacation on their land and go back home like nothing [at] all. These people in the island are struggling through the day to live. (Rachel, female, Caucasian, 20 years old)

Another student explained:

Vieques is a laboratory for how strong capitalism [is], existing in a place where you know it hadn't existed before. What happens with the Bio Bay? What happens with the restaurants? What happens with Esperanza? Whose town is it? Who is left? What do locals think? (Dexter, male, Caucasian, 22 years old)

As indicated above by Dexter's quote, the Bio Bay impromptu learning experience motivated some students to seek out interactions with locals to learn their perspectives. One student did so by accompanying a professor on interviews with cancer survivors on the island: "When I sat in on the interviews [with] the women [in] Vieques who were—both of them were—cancer survivors, I was just filled with so much emotion at hearing their stories" (Janine, female, Korean American, 22 years old).

From stepping outside their comfort zones and initiating conversations with locals, students were able to learn about issues beyond those covered in the Caribbean Studies Summer Institute. For example, Joanna, a 21-year-old from Cape Verde reared in Boston, took a risk and ventured out to learn more about gender issues in the Caribbean. In Esperanza, Vieques, she observed and was surprised that an 11-year-old girl dressed provocatively and walked around town in the evening when there were mostly men. To understand the girl's motivation and perspective, Joanna engaged her in conversation in Spanish:

I was able to talk to her. I was asking her what did she think about it. She was like. . . Her grandma raised her. It's traditional that they behave this way, a thing that has not changed over time.

Later, Joanna witnessed another girl (8 years old) in (what Joanna would consider) an inappropriately provocative dress. From a conversation with the girl's mother, Joanna learned that this is typical behavior. Consequently, Joanna chose the gender socialization of girls and young women in the Caribbean as the topic of her research project.

This commitment to further learning translated into a shift of perspective and the adoption of a framework through which participants interpreted their experiences and sought out information during the remaining weeks. In this way, impromptu learning experiences can transform the curriculum into student-centered model of learning where students are intrinsically motivated to seek out further knowledge, make additional observations and engage critically with the world.

As proposed earlier, impromptu learning is most likely to occur when learners encounter novel and complex situations, such as when conflicts arise. Experiences such as these require learners to observe and analyze the situation, and question and re-examine their own beliefs and assumptions (Alvarez & Rogers, 2006). As a result, they must accept, or at least, acknowledge that multiple perspectives and realities exist, and that what is "true" or "right" may be subjective. The Bio Bay incident allowed students to better comprehend the complexities surrounding tourism and economic development, as compared to when students learned about these topics via classroom activities and readings. As demonstrated in the student interview and journal entries above, students formulated their own meanings of the event, and multiple interpretations, narratives and arguments emerged and co-existed. Many of these interpretations even subverted the position put forth by instructors or academic literature. All in all, this experience exposed students to the messy and complex reality of tourist development "on the ground," from the perspective of locals.

### Conclusion

Some informal learning experiences are so personalized, strong and alluring that they engage, invigorate, and mobilize students to learn more. In this article, we introduced impromptu learning as a new type of incidental learning and presented evidence for the impact of impromptu learning on future learning. Impromptu learning is powerful because it transforms learning, such that it becomes student-led instead of being directed by the program, a curriculum, or

professors. Impromptu learning experiences do not involve a teacher or a classroom, but rather, a situation that empowers students to find their own definitions and interpretations of problems, motivates them to ask their own questions, and affords them the opportunity to engage with the world as participants and not as mere spectators. As Freire (1997) suggested in his description of problem-posing education, "The students, no longer docile listeners, are now critical investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (p. 62), with their peers, and with *viequenses*. Impromptu learning experiences expose students to the world about which they are learning, and they cannot help but to see themselves as part of it, thus shifting their vision of the world:

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed. (Freire, 1997, p. 62)

Because impromptu learning is a new pedagogical technique, further research is needed to evaluate its long-term impact on student learning. For example, a longitudinal study spanning 6 to 12 months may uncover whether the transformation and shift in perspective that occur in students translate into advocacy or activism for the topic at hand (e.g., tourism and economic development). A study such as this will determine whether impromptu learning can truly empower and prepare students to become agents of change and "responsible global citizens" (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002, p. 43).

### Recommendations

If impromptu learning experiences are unplanned, how can we foster them? Although we cannot plan impromptu learning experiences, educators who use experiential learning should encourage and plan for students to have opportunities to participate in unscripted activities, meet and interact with locals, and observe the new culture in various settings. These unplanned events are merely chance incidents unless reflection occurs; reflection is necessary for learners to process and garner knowledge from experience. Even though reflection can happen during formal learning activities, teachers need to acknowledge that it may also



occur informally and spontaneously, such as in impromptu discussions with peers over meals or when they unwind after a long day. It is the informal and unplanned nature of these impromptu learning experiences that turns instructor-led curricula into student-led curricula.

Although study abroad is the ideal environment for impromptu learning, impromptu learning can occur in any setting and in any discipline. For example, impromptu learning can be facilitated by experiences such as residential internship programs like the University of California Washington Center (UCDC) with a focus on political science, residential community service programs like AmeriCorps with emphases in education, the environment, and other areas, and immersion service-learning programs (Tremethick & Smit, 2009; Warner & Esposito, 2009). More simply, higher education professionals can foster impromptu learning by encouraging students to engage in social exchanges, interact with their environment, step outside their comfort zones and wander to unfamiliar places. In other words, the objective is to create experiential learning opportunities in which impromptu learning situations might occur. While aware of the potential safety hazards, students should be exposed to complicated, confusing, and overwhelming situations that challenge them and force them to adapt and learn. These experiences are in essence “lectures” or “lessons” (Eneroth, 2008). The teacher’s role is to create the conditions for these learning experiences to occur, and most importantly, to be attentive to when they occur in order to facilitate and support reflection. A crucial element of experiential learning is reflection; therefore, it is imperative that teachers reserve time for learners to discuss, process and transform their experiences into knowledge. Reflection may take the form of sharing experiences and telling stories in small group, or participating in facilitated large group discussions.

### Implications

We are calling fellow teachers to limit formal learning experiences that students have in order to cultivate more incidental and unplanned learning, or impromptu learning. During these experiences, students enjoy the opportunity and freedom to make their own observations, generate their own hypotheses, engage in conversations with people who are different from themselves and guide their own learning, thus making the curriculum more student-centered. At the same time, it is the teachers’ responsibility to equip students with the methodological tools to make insightful observations and to ask appropriate questions that can elicit locals’ perspectives. As education is becoming increasingly scripted, with limited teacher creativity

and routinized classes due to excessive testing, we highlight impromptu learning as a powerful pedagogical experience, stronger than any formal class structure can offer.

One of the major implications of impromptu incidents is the pedagogical power of its effect on undergraduate students. The lessons of impromptu learning serve as a reminder of the transformative effects of a curriculum that is “taken over” by students (i.e., student-directed). In response, higher education teachers should find innovative ways to engage students in real-life problems that are contemporary and urgent. With the tenets of experiential and transformative learning in mind, teachers should remember to give students space and time to reflect on their own, create their own interpretations, and allow them to negotiate these multiple perspectives with each other. We urge educators interested in transformative pedagogy to re-evaluate their courses in order to integrate unplanned, incidental activities such as impromptu learning experiences. At the core, impromptu learning emphasizes that every experience, every incident, and every interaction can be a learning opportunity and has the potential to transform learning and learners themselves.

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