

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP: LESSONS 2 LIBERIA

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Abstract

The 'Lessons 2 Liberia' project took place from November 2015 to January 2016. Building on my own connection with the school community in Kwendin, Liberia, this project used the wealth of knowledge, resources and abilities in the students of St. George's to create a blended learning, distance education program. I wanted to see what effect this project would have in developing our boys as Global Citizens. After a series of information sessions and discussions about what life in Liberia is like and how it got that way, the boys were given the freedom to choose a topic that they felt confident turning into a lesson. They wrote, recorded, and edited the lessons before submitting them to me. I did some final edits, and the finished lessons were then sent off to Kwendin at the start of February, 2016. By the end of the project, I saw that in some boys it revealed their commitment to the global community, and in others it opened their eyes to possibilities that they hadn't considered before. In some boys, it also revealed a sensitivity as they struggled to find a way to share their knowledge without being condescending or culturally insensitive.

Introduction

The month of March 2014 was a significant junction in my own life. During that month, I lived and taught at the Kwendin Vocational Training Center (KVTC) in Nimba County, Liberia. In my time there, I witnessed first hand the effects of the prolonged civil war and political instability on the school system. None of the math and science teachers that I worked with were able to graph equations, or work properly with the metric system – even though it is becoming the official system of measurement in Liberia. Most of the teachers said to me, "I was never taught how to do this, so I am also unable to teach my students."

In spite of the problems with the physical infrastructure, many of which were highlighted in 2014/15 during the Ebola outbreak, the country of Liberia is taking a bold leap into the digital age. Many of the students at KVTC had mobile phones and solar-charging panels. In 2014, there were

rumours of new developments coming to Kwendin. These rumours included a biomass generator from USAID, which came to fruition in December, 2015 and was documented by the Huffington Post (Duffy, 2015), as well as power-lines from the Côte D'Ivoire and new mobile network towers to increase network coverage and capacity.

Shortly after my return to Canada, I undertook a project in the 2014/15 school year to deliver Math lessons to my own students in a Flipped Classroom model. It struck me that I could have my students in Canada help me to craft video lessons for the teachers and students of KVTC, thereby creating a long-distance Blended Learning situation. At first, I called this the '*Lessons 4 Liberia*' project, but I have since changed the title to '*Lessons 2 Liberia*'. The change is subtle, but I believe important, in changing the tone to a partnership rather than an imposition on our behalf—we are offering content and information to the teachers and students that they have asked us to deliver, rather than imposing lessons for them to learn.

My action research project was framed around the question, "What is the effect of the '*Lessons 2 Liberia*' project on developing boys as global citizens?" While most action research projects are undertaken as part of a classroom setting, I chose to run mine as a club. As a result, our meetings were held at lunchtime, and were subject to the weekly activities taking place at the school. I wasn't sure what outcomes to expect, but I was curious to see how the boys would respond to my request for help and what their overall response to the project would be.

Literature Review

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

-Nelson Mandela

Among the *Lessons from Madiba*, which were imparted at the 2015 IBSC Conference, this oft-quoted statement by Nelson Mandela seemed especially pertinent to the topic of global citizenship. Indeed, one of the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals, recently updated to Sustainable Development Goals, is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). This goal applies not only to the developing world, but also focusses a lens back on those of us in the developed world:

challenging us on what we truly know about the people who live outside of our society. The *Lessons 2 Liberia* project is an attempt to use an educational tool that can foment change in both developed and developing nations.

The needs of Liberia are staggering. After 30 years of political instability and two civil wars, how does a country begin to heal and get back on its feet? The statistics in *The World Factbook* (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015) paint a stark picture. With a population of just over 4 million people, the median age of Liberians is 18 years old, meaning that half the nation isn't even old enough to exercise their right to vote in elections. The country has a literacy rate of 47.6% among those over age 15. Looking deeper into this statistic, it is actually 62.4% literacy among males, but only 32.8% for females. I saw these numbers play out in my own experience at KVTC, where the class of 9th grade students was composed of four young men aged 18 to 22, and two 16 year-old girls. Elsewhere, I saw 24 year-old women studying 4th grade material, and even 13 year-olds in Kindergarten. "Inclusive and equitable" education becomes even more difficult when the teachers too are hampered by their own limited access to education. Many of the teachers I worked with struggled with their course material simply because they grew up during such tumultuous times. "I can't teach my students to graph an equation," a teacher confided in me, "because I myself was never taught how to do it."

Professor Yves Epelboin (2015), of the UPMC-Sorbonne-Universités, cites the "critical shortage" of both schools and quality instructors in Africa and Asia. However, he points to the rising availability of high-speed communications and the access to the internet as a possible way to help ease the transition. Indeed, distance learning is not a new concept, but distance learning via a *Flipped Classroom* allows for expert instruction to be delivered much more personally.

It has been my experience that *Flipped Learning* videos are much more effective when the lessons are delivered by a person who is known to the students. Bergmann and Sams (2012) affirm that there is value in the videos being made by a teacher who is known personally by the students (p.106). Further, they recognize the potential for students to also become content makers in a flipped learning network (p.50). In this way, the boys of St. George's can leverage my relationship with KVTC to create uniquely tailored content for the students and faculty of KVTC.

Bringle and Hatcher (1996) speak of service learning as “an organized service activity that meets identified community needs” wherein students “reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.” Looking forward to a world that is increasingly networked and interconnected, civic responsibility starts to move beyond our local neighbourhoods, and across boundaries which were once nearly impenetrable. This may seem a stretch, but one need only listen to the impassioned speech of retired Lieutenant-General and Canadian Senator, Roméo Dallaire (n.d.) as he envisions the 21st century where these borders are broken down:

“Are all humans human? Or are some more human than others? No matter how idealistic the aim sounds, this new century must become the Century of Humanity, when we as human beings rise above race, creed, colour, religion, and national self-interest and put the good of humanity above the good of our own tribe. For the sake of the children and our future.”

Empathy is not something that can be taught in the course of a lecture or presentation. It is the capacity to know and feel the experiences of others, and can best be cultivated through experiences that bring people together who might not otherwise have met (Flowers, 2014). The boys of St. George’s already take part in a number of activities that help to develop empathy; whether it is the *Roots of Empathy* program in the Junior School, *Reading Bears* at 8th grade, or the *Alderwood Mentorship* program in 12th grade. My colleagues running the *Alderwood* program (where a selected group of 12th grade boys regularly spend time working and playing with underprivileged children with multiple life and personal challenges) have shared stories with me of the transformative power of this kind of service learning on our own students – as well as for those that our boys are serving. Bringle and Hatcher make the point that “service learning ... produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to course material through reflection activities such as directed writings, small group discussions, and class presentations.”

A distinguishing feature of a service learning experience is the act of reflection. In *The Complete Guide to Service Learning*, Cathryn Kaye (2004) writes:

“Reflection is a vital and ongoing process in service learning that integrates learning and experience with personal growth and awareness. Using reflection, students consider how

the experience, knowledge, and skills they are acquiring relate to their own lives and their communities.... Reflection is a pause button that gives students the time to explore the impact of what they are learning and its effect on their thoughts and future actions.” (p.11)

In this way, the *Lessons 2 Liberia* project was an attempt to meet the needs of one school in Liberia, while also attempting to cultivate an awareness of global realities among the boys of St. George’s School.

Research Context

St. George’s School is a vibrant community of 1150 boys from Grades 1 to 12. Included in that total are one hundred boys in Grades 8 to 12 who are full-time boarders, representing 18 different countries. Although it is widely regarded as a university preparatory school, the mission statement does not express university acceptance as a goal. Rather, it expresses a desire to develop “young men who will shape positive futures for themselves, their families, and the global community” (St. George’s School, n.d.). Character education has long been recognized as an essential component of St. George’s School. As such, the core values of *Empathy, Humility, Integrity, Respect, Responsibility, and Resilience* are reinforced at every reasonable opportunity.

Following an appeal for participants, which I made in a Grade 11 and 12 Assembly, I had 40 boys express a desire to be part of my research group. Some of the boys are members of my Advisor Group, some are boys I teach or have taught, while many more are boys with whom I have never engaged. Expecting maybe 10 to 15 boys to volunteer, I was overwhelmed by the initial support shown by the boys.

At that time, letters were sent home to parents of all 40 boys, outlining the project and requesting consent for their sons’ participation. The letter assured them of the boys’ anonymity in the final report, and requested permission for filmed recordings of our group interview sessions. Given the nature of the project, some of the students took on a background role – for example, video editing and technical support. The boys who appeared in the lessons have all did so with the informed consent of their parents.

The Action

Through a series of emails, we settled on a few dates when we could meet as a group to discuss the project. The first two sessions focussed on the particular needs of education systems in developing nations. I referenced the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and I also shared pictures, videos and stories of my own experiences in Liberia. The boys were often amazed by my personal stories, almost finding it hard to believe that I was describing a real place. Prior to the Winter Break in December, I demonstrated my own process for creating my Flipped Videos. I set up an online discussion area where the boys could post what topic(s) they intended to work on and ask for advice on their scripts. The boys recorded their content, and submitted it to me before the end of January so that I could load it all onto a single device for transport to KVTC in February.

Data Collection

In our first session, the boys recorded their responses to questions about their awareness of global issues. The questions were both self-devised, open-ended ones, and multiple choice questions taken from an entry on the blog of Bill Gates titled, “See If You Can Beat My Score on This World IQ Quiz” (Gates, 2015). I also took notes of the boys’ comments and discussions during this session.

Upon the conclusion of the project, the boys completed an online questionnaire, and were also invited to a group discussion over a pizza lunch. Although I set the topics for the discussion, the intent was to give the boys an opportunity to share their thoughts about their experiences over the course of the project. I tried to moderate the discussion, and only spoke in response to direct questions that they had for me.

Data Analysis

I reviewed the answers that the boys had given in the first session, and compared this to my notes. I entered their results into a spreadsheet in order to make comparisons across the group. I did the same for their responses to the final questionnaire, and searched the data for common responses and themes. I transcribed the entire meeting from the wrap-up luncheon, and again compared their spoken comments with the written. The data were analysed looking for before and after comments

from the boys in regards to empathy for global needs, and any changes in their understandings. Looking for common themes, words, and phrases, allowed for deeper analysis of the data. (Stringer 2014). In reporting my results, the boys' words are quoted directly to ensure authenticity and to prevent my own voice from dominating theirs.

Discussion of Results

Not surprisingly, given the diverse makeup of St. George's School, I found at the outset that the boys' awareness of global issues was quite good. While they were unaware of specific issues related to Liberia, they did have a good understanding of the larger issues at play. When asked, "What do you see as the main obstacles preventing 'inclusive and equitable quality education' in the developing world?" many of them had good insights.

"Wealth and Income - Children need to work sometimes and can't be allowed to go to school. Resources - inadequate supplies, teachers (supply), and facilities," wrote Daniel (all names of students involved in the project have been changed in order to protect their anonymity). Karl echoed this sentiment, adding that, "Socioeconomic conditions for families [could be] leading to students withdrawing from school." Other boys remarked that in some cases there is simply too much danger associated with education. Leonard listed "Danger, military conflicts, Boko Haram, ISIS, lack of educational resources" as key obstacles. Another key factor that many remarked upon was the lack of resources available to the governments, and thus their inability to provide a strong educational programme. Thom remarked: "While the nation is rebuilding itself, maybe it won't have the time to give for education, might be focused on other issues. Teachers might not have received education, so they might not understand curriculum...might not have a curriculum."

In spite of these insights into the challenges facing the education systems of the developing world, it was also interesting to see how limited the boys' understanding was of specific global issues. The Bill Gates quiz asked "Which country has seen the biggest jump in per-person income since 1960?" Upon discovering that the answer is Botswana, one of the boys blurted out, "Where is Botswana anyways?" Another question asked how many more people had access to running water in 2014 compared to 1990. The choices included 1.9 million, 190 million, and 1.9 billion. After one boy indicated that he had chosen 1.9 billion, his friend reacted by saying "You put 1.9 billion? Are you crazy?" As it turned out, he was not crazy – the correct response was 1.9 billion. In the

discussion that followed, we began to realize that many of us have an understanding of the broad strokes of global issues, but that many of the specifics are often clouded in misconceptions, bias, and in some cases a misplaced sense of patriotism. On the question of “What percentage of the US Budget goes towards foreign aid?” many of the boys correctly guessed 1%. However, they all believed that Canada was doing far more, and giving in excess of this amount – some guessing as high as 5%. In actual fact, Canada allocated about 1.5% of its budget to foreign aid in 2014.

The final group discussion and questionnaire provided insight into the boys’ motivations and experiences with the project. On average, the boys who responded indicated that they spent just over 3 hours working on their videos. Their times ranged from as little as 15 minutes in one case to nearly 10 hours in another case. In the case of Jervis, who spent 10 hours in production, he wrote detailed notes and produced 7 videos on his own as well as one more with a partner! When asked about his motivation to be involved in the project, he stated that “I wanted to help provide better education for those with little to no access to one.” This was a common theme among all of the responses: they felt it was a creative, direct and easy way to help an international educational need. As Melvin said, “When I saw the presentation you made during assembly, it was very clear that the cause was important, and I felt that I could definitely help. I have been relatively successful academically at Saints, and I knew I could use that strength to help the project.” In addition, Zackery indicated a potential self-gain from producing the video: “I wanted to re-affirm my own understanding in the topics on which I chose to make videos.”

When asked what they learned in the course of the project, the boys indicated that in addition to their awareness of global issues, it was their awareness and appreciation for the act of teaching that grew. Two of the boys spoke of a newfound appreciation for the work that has to be done to carefully prepare examples when teaching. As Leonard said, “You need to plan ahead. A lot.” It was also evident that the boys developed a cultural awareness and sensitivity through the course of the action. Art said, “I found that I was struggling to find a balance between ... trying to explain the terms and the words that I was using, without feeling that I was being condescending... I know that if I was in their position, and I was getting these videos from people that are very privileged and ... they just explain a word that I completely understand I would think ‘Oh, well they don’t think I’m smart enough to know that’ It’s just a fine line there...” It seems to have been a unique

educational experience for the boys, but also one that challenged their cultural awareness and sensitivity.

In response to the question, “What incentives, if any, should be offered for students who take part in this type of project in the future?” all but two of the boys said that they didn’t believe any incentives should be offered, but that the project was better without them. Thom said, “I don't think there should be incentives offered. I think people who take this kind of project should be genuine without pursuing a lot of ulterior motives. I think the feeling of helping other people for self-satisfaction is enough of an incentive.” Art’s response was again insightful, “I think that when it comes to offering incentives, it can have both positive and negative results. The positive being, there are more people likely to take part in the project, and as a result more videos are made, but a negative result could be that people are only taking part in order to receive whatever the incentive is and the quality of work could go down.” Zackery, Joss and Melvin all echoed this concern that offering incentives may have the negative consequence of attracting people who don’t really care about the project, as much as they care about getting recognition for being part of the project.

The struggle between anonymity and recognition continued as the boys discussed ideas for the future of the project. Melvin indicated an eagerness to develop a website where we could archive the project and store the videos. His purpose was two-fold, so that KVTC – and perhaps other schools in a similar situation – could find online access to the resources that we have curated, and also so that members of the project can direct friends and family members to see the work that we have done this year. This brought up the idea of making a presentation in a school assembly about the work that has been done this year and what we would like to do for next year. “Since the initial request, this project has really operated under the radar,” commented Melvin, “so it would be good to show people what we’ve accomplished.” To which Darian added, “Honestly, there is so much crummy stuff that is presented at assembly, so to finally have something that is somewhat interesting – that would be great.” Art demonstrated a long term concern for the project by encouraging me to make the presentation at a Grade 10 assembly.

Since a large number of the current group are in 12th grade, we will need a youth movement if we want the project to continue. Art asked if it would be possible to tap into the diversity of our school to make videos in more languages. “We could branch out from just sending videos like these to

Liberia, we could find other schools similar to this all across the world.” He further mused, “There are kids in this school that speak a huge variety of languages.... Say if you had one of the boarders interested in this and there was a school in Mexico, or any Spanish speaking country. We don’t need to limit these videos to just being in English.... You could definitely expand this project quite a lot.” In the end, what came through wasn’t so much that the boys involved in the project wanted individual recognition for their work, but that they wanted recognition for the goals of the project and for the people of Liberia at the other end of the project.

Conclusion

In working through the data, I’ve come to believe that the research question I asked was incomplete. “*What is the effect of the ‘Lessons 4 Liberia’ project on developing boys as global citizens?*” There certainly were developments, as boys like Art struggled with the cultural sensitivity of coming from a place of extreme privilege and working to help those with so much less. The research did more than simply developing boys as global citizens. An unexpected result was that it served to reveal how committed the boys were as global citizens. If I were to re-write the question now, it would ask what the effect is on developing and revealing boys as global citizens.

This revelation of the boys’ global citizenry wasn’t something that I truly recognized until the final discussion and questionnaire. When the project began in late October, there were 40 boys who volunteered. At the end of January, I had received video content from 11 boys – some working in groups, others on their own. The wrap-up meeting was attended by only 7 boys, although 15 had RSVP’d, and the final questionnaire was completed by 11 boys. While I heard various apologies from the boys who dropped out, (“I need to focus on my university applications right now,” and “I’m too busy with athletics and other extra-curriculars right now” were common reasons), the ones who remained in the project were just as busy, and in some cases have even greater levels of commitment as leaders within the school. For every boy who felt the burden of sharing with me why he could no longer commit to the project, there were many more who simply drifted away without a word. I do not mean this as a condemnation of those who were not able to see through to the end of the project – rather, this is a celebration of those who kept a commitment and followed through on something that was important to them.

When I pass through the hallways of the school, and I see the boys who were involved in the project, they often ask me about the project. “How were the videos received?” “When will we be working to make more?” “What’s the path going forward for next year?” This action became a learning opportunity for the boys, and an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to playing a meaningful role as global citizens.

Given the excitement among the boys to see the project continue and the ideas they had for expanding it next year, I do not see myself stopping it at this time. Now that I look at unhitching it from being a controlled part of an action research project, I can see more opportunities for student leadership to guide the project along and let them steer it in new directions.

Reflection Statement

In many ways, this project is the most recent phase of a personal journey that began in December of 2013 when I approached the Headmaster of St. George’s, Dr. Tom Matthews, to ask if it might be possible for me to travel to Liberia. Without his approval at that time, I don’t see how any of this would have been possible. So I am deeply thankful to him for his support of me along the way. In September 2014, as the Ebola outbreak continued to spiral out of control, I spoke about my trip in a school assembly. I’ll never forget the stillness of the boys as they listened to my stories of what life and education is like in a developing nation—it spurred conversations in the classroom, the hallways, and the staffroom that have continued to this day. I am grateful to be part of a community that strives to recognize its place in the global community and looks for ways to serve.

I want to thank Andrew Jones, my friend and mentor in this project who checked in with me regularly to offer advice, encouragement and assistance when needed. This journey began when I shared my crazy idea with him, late one night in Richmond, Virginia, where we were attending a Mathematics Conference. I believe his words were, “You have to do this. Even if it isn’t accepted as an IBSC project. You must.” It confirmed my own convictions, and gave me the confidence that I needed to get started. Thanks to Marc Crompton who helped me with my literature research and also provided me with many of the technical tools that I needed along the way – camera, tripod, and memory cards!

I cannot forget Josh Norman, my long-suffering team leader, who I first met while waiting to clear customs in South Africa. As he waited patiently in that lineup and cheerfully introduced himself and identified other members of our team, I should have seen a foreshadowing of his patience to come as I overstepped many of the project deadlines. Along the way, his reassurances that I had a worthwhile project, and that my research would yield positive results were just the guidance I needed. Thank you.

I have enjoyed meeting, emailing, and interacting with all of “Team Josh.” Working with colleagues from around the globe and finding out that the boys at our schools are not so very different, has been a tremendous opportunity for professional growth. You are all inspiring to me, and I am glad to have worked with all of you this past year.

Finally, my gratitude to the boys of St. George’s who volunteered to be a part of my project. Thank you to the boys who listen to the stories that I tell of my friends in Kwendin; to the boys who have made a personal contribution to assist in helping friends they have never met; to the boys without whose dedication to “being the change that they want to see in the world” none of this would have happened.

I look forward to the next chapter of this journey. I have some ideas about where it may head for me personally, but as with any good novel, there is plenty of mystery and uncertainty. I also look forward to hearing about the journeys that the boys will embark on, as they find their own ways to assert themselves as citizens of Earth.

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