

# Short-Term Study Abroad for Texas Preservice Teachers

## On the Road from Empathy to Critical Awareness

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### Introduction

*I'm glad especially that I took Second Language Acquisition [as a short-term study abroad in Mexico] because when other people in my [preservice teacher preparation program] described their Second Language Acquisition courses they said, 'oh yeah we did a presentation about that' or 'I wrote a reflection on that.' And I say, "Well, I LIVED it!! (Lauren, follow-up interview, 8/1/10)*

Among the coursework offered to preservice teachers at the first author's institution in 2007 was the course "Second Language Acquisition" (SLA). This course was designed to develop multicultural awareness by introducing the theory and practice of second language acquisition and helping future teachers become familiar with the struggles of immigrant students and better understand the process of cultural and linguistic adaptation these students go through in Texas schools.

In May 2007 the first author taught SLA as a one-month study-abroad course to a diverse group of 11 undergraduate students in Cuernavaca, Mexico. For several, this was their first travel beyond Texas. Along with course readings and discussions, students lived with Mexican host families, visited local schools, studied Spanish, and participated in numerous lectures and excursions. An explicit goal of the program was to facilitate preservice teachers' ability to articulate a critical understanding of the needs of immigrant and second language learning students in their future public school classrooms.

Specifically, the program was designed to facilitate *critical consciousness* (Freire,

2000), which we defined as an awareness of the larger structures of power influencing the school experiences of immigrants and ELL students and a commitment to act on their behalf. To this end, students were presented with a wide range of experiences meant to challenge them, including field trips, films, speakers, readings, discussions, and immersion with local families. At the same time, they engaged in dialogue journals with their instructor, writing two entries per week and receiving weekly responses.

These dialogue journals, students' other work products from the course, pre- and post-surveys, and follow-up interviews three years after the experience served as sources of data in a qualitative research study exploring the question "what is the impact of the study-abroad experience on preservice teachers' understandings of the experiences of immigrant children in American schools?"

We were interested in exploring the ways that students articulated connections between their negotiation of a new cultural context and language (Mexico/Spanish), and the work their future immigrant students would be doing. We were also interested in the types of experiences that appeared to stretch and transform students' thinking about immigration, immigrant children, culture, and bilingualism. Our concern was how study-abroad experiences contributed to the development of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Byram et al, 2002) for preservice teachers.

In this article we explore the teacher education and study abroad research literature on developing critical consciousness and empathy, including the construct of "interculturality," and briefly review the ways in which dialogue journals have been used to explore questions such as ours. We then present evidence from the dialogue journals and other data collected from the seven student participants who were preservice teachers, to illustrate the

extent to which their affective and empathetic responses helped them begin to develop critical understanding of the systematic nature of inequality in immigrant children's lives.

We argue that it was students' confrontations with the *limits* to their own sense of empathy that led them in the direction of critical consciousness, and that while the full development of critical consciousness (Freire, 2000) seemed beyond their reach during this short-stay study abroad a more modest goal of "critical cultural awareness" (Byram et al, 2002), the ability to analytically compare their own experiences with others, began to emerge. We reflect upon the possibilities and limitations of experiences during short-term study abroad in moving students toward systematic understandings of inequality and commitment to action.

### Developing Critical Consciousness and Empathy in Prospective Teachers

As mentioned above, a central goal of this study-abroad program was to help participants develop what Villegas and Lucas (2002) call "sociocultural consciousness" through a process sometimes referred to as *concientization* (Freire, 2000; Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004)—a deepening union between social awareness and moral commitment. Freire describes this process as follows:

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in 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, 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. (2000, p.81)

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For the purposes of this analysis, we will use the term “critical consciousness” to refer to the above described understanding of the role of power in larger social structures and one’s own responsibility to act in the interests of the oppressed.

While conscientization, or the development of critical consciousness, is neither easy nor automatic (Sleeter, et al., 2004), for the most part this review of literature will focus on programs that have been shown to help at least some participants develop critical consciousness. Villegas and Lucas (2002) note the importance for new teachers to explore both their own cultural identities and the cultural backgrounds of potential students.

However, they argue that cultural understanding alone is not sufficient for effective and respectful teaching in multicultural contexts. Sociocultural consciousness, they assert, includes “an understanding that differences in social location are not neutral” (p. 22). Due to differences in power and privilege between groups in society, “schools . . . maintain structures that severely limit the probability of advancement for those at the bottom of the social scale” (Sleeter, et al., 2004, p. 22; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

It is essential, given this reality, that teachers acknowledge their own social positions, learn to see “schools and society as interconnected,” and “view themselves as agents of change” (Sleeter, et al., 2004, p. 24, cf. Alfaro & Quezada, 2010). As Sleeter, et. al. write, “recognition of privilege is not enough, but recognition of complicity in maintaining injustice if one does nothing is essential” (p. 83). It is crucial that teachers see the possibility for change and their own role in making that change happen.

Yet the question of how to help preservice teachers develop this understanding remains somewhat open. While researchers and teacher educators argue the need for critical multicultural coursework similar to the SLA course described in this article to help develop the “critical engagement” of future teachers (Chávez & O’Donnell, 1998; Cochran-Smith, 2004), at the same time some research is demonstrating the ineffectiveness of traditionally-structured university courses to impact future teachers (Chávez & Writer, 2006; Urrieta & Reidel, 2006). Some studies have explored the possibilities of study abroad programs in supporting this endeavor.

### Different Cultural Perspectives

Arguing for study abroad programs in teacher education, Cushner writes that

“the recognition of the interconnectedness of local and global intersections of power, discrimination and identity” has the tendency to turn teachers’ “attention to domestic diversity in order to pursue local ramifications of globalization” (2007, p. 34). Although de Nooy and Hanna (2003) rightly point out that the increased cultural “understanding” promised in study-abroad promotional brochures is never clearly defined, and could potentially refer to intellectual, emotional, or even linguistic comprehension, Cushner argues that these types of comprehension are not necessarily separable, given the close relationship between cognition and affect/experience (2007, p. 35). In Murphy-Lejeune’s extensive European study abroad research (2002),<sup>1</sup> she came to see that the affective and cognitive disorientation often called “culture shock” is in fact “the necessary lever which prisms open individuals in their search for shared meaning.” (p. 133).

This kind of openness to different cultural perspectives is increasingly seen as valuable in teachers preparing for service in diverse communities. Reporting on one specific program, Alfaro and Quezada argue that student teaching in Mexico

. . . forces teacher candidates to experience cultural, pedagogical, and ideological dissonance, a sensation that promotes increased ideological awareness and clarity. (2010, p. 50)

Participants in Alfaro and Quezada’s program gained awareness of socioeconomic inequality in the schools of both Mexico and the United States, along with their own positions of relative privilege. Nevertheless, it is problematic to assume that immersion automatically leads to deepened multicultural understanding—let alone any form of critical consciousness. It may not so much matter whether a program takes place “abroad,” but rather the extent to which the program includes the elements that will provide for an “opening up” of the participants to “the experience of otherness” and the opportunity “to reflect upon and learn from that experience” (Cain & Zarate, 1996, p. 66).

### Intercultural Experiences

Garmon (2004) explores the interplay between long- and short-term sociocultural development through a case study of one education student during her four years at his university. He emphasizes “it was her intercultural experiences that actually stimulated her multicultural growth by pushing her out of her comfort zone”

(p. 212). Experiences such as watching documentary films on disparities between inner city and suburban schools, volunteering at an inner-city church, and reading critical texts such as Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* (1991), offered her opportunities to encounter cultural diversity and structural inequalities, and appeared to have a significant impact on her.

Garmon’s study provides hope for teacher educators who strive to facilitate students’ development of critical consciousness by combining classroom instruction with what Nieto (2006) describes as “direct contact with people who are culturally different from oneself in a real-life setting which represents the target group’s ‘turf’” (p. 77). For example, in Ukpokodu’s (2004) study, pre-service teachers came to a new understanding of the reality of inner-city youth by spending time with them in their daily lives. Similarly, Houser (2008) notes the development of empathy as one of the values of a “cultural plunge” for prospective teachers. To illustrate this, he presents a participant’s reflection about spending two hours at a Thai temple with her Thai immigrant mother:

The discomfort I felt . . . could not compare to the anxiety my mom experienced when she arrived in the United States. . . The entire time I was at the temple I just wanted to ‘fit in’ and I felt the best way for me to fit in was to learn the language. . . This insight has given me a newfound respect for my mother and what she went through when she moved from one culture to another. (pp. 473-474)

Clearly, this prospective teacher’s new understanding of her mother’s feelings as an immigrant will help her to come to a better understanding of the feelings of her future immigrant students.

### Empathy and Love

For these authors, empathy, the ability to experience the feelings of another, or metaphorically “put oneself in the shoes” of another, appears as a precursor to the potential development of critical consciousness. Freire’s (2000) explanation of the role love plays in dialogue echoes the importance of affective factors in coming to critical consciousness:

No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of *love* is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical. (p. 89)

Having experienced empathy for the oppressed, students—particularly those from

relatively privileged backgrounds—have opened a door to the possibility of seeing the systematic nature of oppression.

However, the value of empathy as a means to critical consciousness and commitment has also been questioned. As Taylor argues (2007), the development of “empathy” can be a self-serving process when it is undertaken to “demonstrate one’s morally sanctioned understanding of and cosmopolitan enlightenment regarding the Other” (p. 300). Even while promoting the cultural plunge experience for prospective teachers, Houser admits that the “plunge was sometimes viewed in paternalistic or redemptive terms rather than as a genuine opportunity to seek understanding,” and that some participants seemed to have “voyeuristic” motivations (2008, p. 477).

Pointing out the gap between empathy and action, Boler (1999) warns against an ahistorical passive empathy that does not challenge the world view of the person who feels it, a phenomenon termed by Taylor “emotional tourism” (2007, p. 302). Both Taylor and Boler note the importance for students of coming to terms with their *inability* to fully identify with other human beings in sociohistorical contexts different from their own.

### Critical Empathy

What is needed, writes DeStigter (1999), is *critical empathy*:

The process of establishing informed and affective connections with other human beings, of thinking and feeling with them at some emotionally, intellectually, and socially significant level, while always remembering that such connections are complicated by sociohistorical forces. (p. 240)

From this perspective, empathetic experiences not only foster a sense of emotional connection and understanding between human beings, but also potentially draw attention to the *limits* of understanding and connection across disparate social and cultural contexts. When a preservice teacher confronts both his/her feelings of connection to another person and also the sociocultural limits to those feelings, s/he can gain new understanding of how s/he and the other person are situated in the larger context, and even begin “to recognize (him/her)self as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront” (Boler, 1999, p. 166). It is through this understanding and recognition that teachers can come to “gradually...regard

themselves as committed” (Freire, 2000, p. 81), and to “view themselves as agents of change” (Sleeter et al, 2004, p. 24) in inequitable educational contexts.

Previous research on study abroad has not examined the potential of study-abroad experiences for the development of critical empathy in prospective teachers. The role of empathy in growth/learning in study-abroad in general has not been widely studied. Kinginger’s analysis of her own findings on language learning in study-abroad (2008) lists “empathy and respect for others” as one of the “new capacities,” along with “awareness of language learning as a long term investment of time and effort,” that American students living abroad will need in order to attain what some perceive as potential outcomes of study-abroad: “an appreciation of global diversity and of human solidarity at an international scale,” (2008, p.105). Apart from this brief mention, empathy is not presented as an analytic category in any study abroad literature that we have encountered.

A general finding among case studies conducted in study-abroad contexts is that the quality and quantity of student learning during study-abroad appear to depend upon a combination of the reception students receive in the host country, and their own ways of integrating experiences (Isabelli-Garcia, 2006; Alfred & Byram, 2006; Kinginger 2008). As Kinginger explains, “Inevitably, students exploring other cultures confront resources, values, and meanings that contradict their habitual assumptions: A great deal depends on how they react to such conflict” (p. 12). If students react to challenging experiences positively, they appear to be more likely to develop social networks in the host country and to open themselves to learning (Isabelli-Garcia, 2006).

### Critical Consciousness

A helpful analytic tool for understanding the relationship between empathy and critical consciousness may be found in Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey’s (2002) framework for interculturality. The authors make a case for including an “intercultural dimension” of language teaching/learning that includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes conducive to effective communication with people different from oneself. Among the attitudes to be encouraged is an openness and a “willingness to relativise one’s own values, beliefs and behaviours ... to be able to see how they might look from an outsider’s perspective,”

(p. 12) which appears to be similar to the development of empathy.

A central skill language teachers are encouraged to help students develop is “critical cultural awareness,” which the authors define as “an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (p. 13). While this definition of critical cultural awareness is more limited than our definition above of critical consciousness as it lacks the “apprehension of a total context” and the ultimate commitment to action that Freire refers to, critical cultural awareness in this sense may actually be more attainable in a short-stay study-abroad program such as the one studied here. Thus, the interculturality framework can help describe potential connections between empathetic understandings and the building of skills to critically analyze contexts during study abroad.

### Experiences and Opportunities

There are two ways in which this short-term study abroad was intended to develop empathy and ultimately at least the beginnings of critical consciousness in prospective teachers. First, immersed in a new culture and language, albeit for a short time and in a relatively protected setting, students were pushed to feel in a small way the shock their future students might experience when plunged into U.S. schools and the English language. Second, with a wide range of experiences, including field trips, films, speakers, readings, discussions, and of course their dialogue journals, students were encouraged to explore larger issues of social inequality, both in Mexican society and in the cross-border relationships between Mexico and the United States. The hope was that the combination of experiences and opportunities for reflection might push them to make a leap towards critical consciousness.

It is certainly possible that a short-term study abroad may at times “reinforce stereotypes and hasty generalizations” (Cain & Zarate, 1996, p. 68) At the same time, we recognize the potential of such experiences to help preservice teachers engage with new cultures and realities and develop the skills and attitudes required for intercultural competence (Cushner, 2007; Alfaro & Quezada, 2010; Byram, et. al. 2002).

Given these contradictory possibilities, to what extent and in what ways did this month-long study-abroad experience in Mexico engage the seven participating

preservice teachers in the development of empathy for their future immigrant students? Furthermore, to what extent and in what ways did it assist them in seeing and acknowledging the structural inequalities faced by immigrant and Latino students in the United States, or in seeing themselves as potential agents of change? To what extent did students develop “critical empathy” (DeStigter, 1999) and embark upon the path to critical consciousness (Freire, 2000)?

**Methodology**

The course employed dialogue journals as one means to help students explore difficult subjects and grow personally through private reflection and intimate contact with the instructor. Dialogue journals have been used to foster reflection in preservice teachers (e.g., Bean & Zulich, 1989; Garmon, 1998), as well as to help usher students through challenging cultural and linguistic transitions, as with immigrant ESL students (e.g., Mlynarczyk, 1998; Peyton & Staton, 1996). Using this tool for preservice teachers studying abroad, it was hoped, would facilitate their adaptation to challenging cultural and linguistic differences during their stay in Mexico, as well as their ability to reflect critically on their own practices and ideas. As Alfaro and Quezada found in their 2010 study of U.S. prospective teachers in Mexico, “Journaling help(ed) participants ... to recognize their classroom responsibilities and commitment to becoming globally competent citizens” (p. 51).

In addition, dialogue journals as data served as one window into students’ emerging understandings. Along with students’ other written assignments and instructor/researcher reflections, students’ dialogue journals were entered into TAMS Analyzer, a qualitative research software, for coding. Through multiple readings and re-readings, they were recursively coded for broad themes such as reflection related to language, culture, and future teaching/ students, or connections to SLA theories, that cut across the participants.

Although multiple data sources were collected and coded, by far the most substantive data emerged from the dialogue journals; they did in fact appear to provide students with a rich opportunity for reflection. One strong theme that emerged across all the preservice teacher participants’ journals was *empathy*, defined for coding purposes as instances in which participants expressed a sense of understanding or sharing for the feelings or experiences

of others. One sub-category of this theme that emerged in subsequent coding was “empathy>ELL” defined as empathy for the situation of immigrants/ELL students in the U.S.; this was by far the most frequently expressed empathetic comment.

There were several codes that overlapped relatively frequently with empathy-coded passages: “learning>language” (talk about learning language), “adapting” (talk about adapting to local culture), “comparison” (comparing own culture/ language with host culture/language), and “futureteaching” (referencing future teaching, students or classroom). The following example, from Kate’s journal, was coded both as “empathy>ELL” and as “learning>language.”

*Estoy un poco triste por que no hay mucho tiempo para aprender más español. Or time to improve our Spanish speaking abilities. Estoy pensando que los niños que mover a los Estados Unidos creían el mismo.*

(I’m a little sad because there isn’t much time to learn more Spanish... I’m thinking that the children who move to the United States think the same.)

Expressions of empathy were prevalent throughout the data, and students appeared to react with empathy when they described interactions with Mexican acquaintances, compared aspects of Mexican culture with their own, faced challenges with adapting to differences, and speculated about their future teaching experiences with ELL students. These connections will be explored.

In order to examine how the students’ experiences abroad may have influenced their current teaching practices or perspectives, the first author made an attempt to follow up with participants three years after the study-abroad program was completed. She posed two general questions: “What do you remember most about your time in

Mexico, and why?” And, “In what ways (if any) did your time in Mexico influence your teaching now?” Five of the seven participants responded: three in writing (electronically, i.e., email or facebook messages) and two in person (interview). These data were analyzed and included in findings.

**Program and Participants**

The study-abroad program lasted for four weeks. There were 11 students in all, eight of whom were prospective teachers. Seven of the prospective teachers agreed to participate in this research. These seven included six women and one man, from diverse ethnic backgrounds; their Spanish levels on arrival ranged from beginning to advanced, and all were in their early 20s. Of the seven, only one—Surjit<sup>2</sup>—had previously traveled abroad, to visit his extended family in India.

All seven expressed anticipation for the trip and a lack of knowledge of the world beyond Texas; several had financed the trip through a combination of expensive student loans and small scholarships, and mentioned that they believed this would be their “only” opportunity to study abroad. Table 1 displays their range of Spanish levels and racial/ethnic backgrounds. For the purposes of this analysis, however, it is their common newness to travel and study-abroad and their common intention to become teachers in diverse, multicultural school settings that will be our focus.

Students were enrolled at a well-established Spanish language school (class levels in Table 1 represent how they were placed on arrival), and studied there approximately 10 hours per week, plus five hours per week for their SLA class. Influenced by Freire (2000), the language school has a strong social justice perspective, and arranged for students to attend talks and field trips to introduce them to contemporary social issues

**Table One**  
Student Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Major	Ethnicity	Spanish Class Level
Anita	F	Elementary Education	African- American	Beginning
Jessica	F	Secondary Math Education	Latina	High-Intermediate, Heritage learner
Kate	F	Elementary Education	Latina/Anglo	Low-Intermediate, Heritage learner
Lauren	F	ESL Elem Education	Anglo-American	Low-Intermediate
Nadia	F	Special Education	Anglo-American	Beginning
Rebecca	F	ESL Elem Education	Anglo-American	Advanced
Surjit	M	Bilingual Elem Education	Indian- American	High-Intermediate; heritage speaker of Gujarati

in Mexico as well as the nation's cultural heritage. Talks included lectures from local professors of education, visits with practicing teachers, and films such as *Granito de Arena* (about the Mexican Teacher's Union Movement) and *Letters from the Other Side* (about the impact of large scale Mexican immigration on rural Mexican society). Visits included tours of local schools both public and private, a visit to a non-profit organization serving children and families in extreme poverty, a visit to the home of a single mother struggling to keep her four children in school, tours of the National Palace and various museums in Mexico City, and visits to archeological sites and a weekend in Acapulco.

Students lived with host families in the local community, which gave them additional chances to practice Spanish and (depending upon their level of Spanish) to engage in conversations about the different cultural, political, and economic realities they experienced. For one or two of the four weeks, in place of Spanish instruction, students were placed as interns in local schools.<sup>3</sup> On top of this intensive schedule, they were assigned weekly reading assignments and participated in weekly discussion seminars in English for their SLA course, and wrote a paper about their internship experience in the local schools.

The dialogue journals were also an assignment for the SLA class. Students were asked to offer at least two separate journal entries per week, with each entry containing both *cuentos* (stories) and *conexiones* (connections). In other words, they were asked to tell about something they saw or did or experienced, and then to make connections between that experience and other things in their lives, such as the themes and ideas discussed in the SLA class or in other classes they'd taken, their own past or future, other people they know, etc. They were asked to write in "as much Spanish as possible" but were not graded on the correctness or amount of their Spanish. Journals were submitted electronically to the first author, who made comments and offered further questions and returned them to students within a few days.

#### Researcher Positionality

Both researchers are White women who speak Spanish fluently as a second language, both with considerable experience living and traveling in Latin America. The first author, the course instructor, had been to Cuernavaca on several other occa-

sions as a student of Spanish and to visit friends and colleagues. She had worked before with the Spanish language school that hosted the program, both as a student and promoter. She is a former dual language bilingual elementary school teacher whose current work involves preparing bilingual and ESL certified teachers for diverse Texas classrooms. The idea for this project came out of a desire to find ways to push the teacher education program at her institution in new directions and to build on her own experiences in Mexico. The second author, a former adult ESL teacher, currently works in applied linguistics and TESOL preparation.

#### Findings

While study abroad was not always comfortable or even positive for the students, their reflections made clear that it was productive in terms of developing empathy. Critical consciousness, however, was not as easily uncovered nor as immediately obvious in their reflections. As students' experiences of linguistic and cultural dissonance in Mexico (Alfaro & Quezada, 2010) led them to express empathy for their future students, they repeatedly confronted their own relative privilege and security, and thus the limits to their own understanding of the realities faced by immigrant children.

We argue that it was this recognition of the limits to empathy that may ultimately lead them to a critical consciousness regarding systematic bias and power imbalance. During their stay in Mexico, however, while most students had strong affective reactions, frequently expressed feelings of empathy with newcomer students on a personal level, and repeatedly seemed to reach the limits of their own empathy, understanding the systemic nature of the differences between their own and their future students' experiences was far more challenging.

At best, students began to develop a "critical cultural awareness" (Byram et al, 2002) challenging their own assumptions and critically comparing their experiences to others, but not quite coming to the systematic understandings of the nature of inequality or commitments to engagement that would imply critical consciousness (Freire, 2000).

In the analysis that follows, we will look at the students' various expressions of empathy with the plight of immigrants and second language learners they encountered. We will then present students'

efforts to reach beyond empathy, to critical cultural awareness (Byram et al, 2002) and towards critical consciousness (Freire, 2000). Finally, we will share students' recent reflections on the impact these experiences had on them. Our conclusion will offer our reflections upon the connections between the development of empathy and the potential for developing critical consciousness in preservice teachers.

#### Empathy

Throughout the students' dialogue journals,<sup>4</sup> students expressed empathy with their future students. First, they recognized their own situations—placed as brief interns in Mexican classrooms or in their Spanish classes at the language school—as similar in some way to the experience immigrant children might have as they enter schools in the United States. Kate's description of her experience interning in a public primary school exemplifies such observations:

We've read about teachers who don't care or don't know how to deal with second language learners. That's how I felt [in the public primary classroom]; like the teacher I was with didn't purposely ignore me, she was very friendly, but just didn't know what to do with me or my language. (Kate, Week 4)

Another example—one offered with a touch of humor and humility—is Lauren's comment about interacting with the children in the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade private school classroom in which she was placed for a week:

One little girl even took the position of telling everyone else when they tried to speak to me that I didn't understand or speak Spanish. I felt very small at that point, and really sympathize with immigrant or ELL students in the US. (Lauren, Week 4)

Another way students appeared to develop empathy was through personal connections made during visits or speakers. For example, a visit to the Ruins of Xochicalco, a large Mesoamerican archeological site, made a tremendous impression upon Jessica. In the reflection below, she expresses her empathy for American students of Mexican origin like herself who grow up without a connection to their history. She draws a connection between her own emotional reaction to seeing the pyramids and the role of a teacher in fostering pride in students for their heritage cultures:

I feel like students who are learning English as a second language need to be given

the opportunity to experience what I felt while at the pyramids [of Xochicalco]. I wonder what it must feel like to find out that a member of your family won that game and died as a sacrifice to their gods. To feel that kind of honor and pride must be unreal. Teachers need to be able to embrace their students' cultures and encourage them to keep it alive in themselves and their actions. (Jessica, Week 3)

It seems that her own emotional reaction has made real for Jessica the power of drawing on students' own cultural heritage in reinforcing students' identities and ultimately sparking their academic achievement. Furthermore, as Jessica makes a direct connection between the limits of her own feelings of empathy (i.e., "I wonder what it must feel like...") and the need as a teacher to take action: (i.e., "Teachers need to..."), she appears to be developing critical empathy (DeStigter, 1999).

In the *conexiones* sections of their journals, many students drew connections between the SLA theories they were learning in class, and their own experiences learning Spanish and adjusting to a new culture. In many cases, these connections led students to express empathy with children coming into U.S. schools without mastery of English or knowledge of the culture. Surjit expressed this very clearly:

I have learned much of the material [a class I took last semester], but learning it again while I am here has a bigger impact on me. I have much more insight about input and output and how the actual process of acquisition works (even though it is very complicated as far as I know) that I am actually experiencing it. I feel that this whole experience is great because it puts us in the shoes of [English] language learners. (Surjit, Week 3)

While Surjit's comment was confined to the challenge of acquiring a new language, Kate's comment below moves quickly into the emotional work of adjusting to a new culture and expresses tremendous empathy for children, who are in a much less empowered position than she as an adult. She was explaining her decision—the same taken by all but two preservice teacher participants—to leave her internship after one week rather than stay for two; in her words, to "flee":

I can't imagine what I would do if I was a young student in elementary school in a similar situation, where I couldn't understand, was new to the area, and couldn't flee. ¡Pobrecitos!?(poor things!) As we've read and discussed, a lot of times this considerably affects the child's performance in school. It makes

them hate school and not want to learn. (Kate, Week 4)

Kate's comment, like Jessica's above, acknowledges the limits of her own empathy. In her words, she "can't imagine" how an experience like hers would impact a young student in elementary school who did not have the power to leave their situation. Because many of the students complained of similar stress and discomfort and asserted they would be better served by language classes, the course instructor and program coordinator decided to allow students to opt to return to the language school for their final week rather than requiring them to complete a second week as interns. Will Kate's attempt to understand the experiences of immigrant youngsters translate into actions on their behalf when she becomes their teacher?

The journals are full of connections to specific SLA theories. Even when they do not immediately or directly express empathy for children or immigrants or second language learners, participants describe their own experiences in such a way as to imply they are developing a visceral understanding of SLA theoretical concepts, which as Surjit suggests above, should assist them to become more effective teachers to students undergoing this process. For example, Rebecca describes her own encounter with her Affective Filter (Krashen, 1985). My affective filter goes up and I shut up. I'm glad that there is a *hipótesis* (hypothesis) that explains how I am acting.

*Cada día/noche hablo con mi mama por cuatro o cinco horas. Es un lugar donde me siento cómoda para hablar sin mi "affective filter," y ella me da tiempo para explicar mis ideas sin prisa.... Pero cuando estoy en clase de Español, es como así me olvido casi todo.*

(Every day/night I talk with my host mother for four or five hours. It's a place where I feel comfortable to talk without my "affective filter," and she gives me time to explain my ideas without rushing... But when I am in Spanish class, it's like I forget almost everything.) (Rebecca, Week 2)

Lauren refers to her "monitor" (Krashen, 1985) in describing her experience with children in an elementary school classroom:

At one point [during my morning in the public elementary classroom] I knocked off my "monitor" and just said whatever came out, which is good, and I enjoyed myself, but partly happened because I was so overwhelmed with the kid's questions, fast talking, and wild behavior. (Lauren, week 4)

As the students grappled with their own discomforts and challenges, they appeared to develop empathy for immigrants dealing with a new language and culture, and for Latino immigrant children entering Texas schools. To what extent did efforts to expose them to a critical explanation for these challenges, and to push them to reflect, result in their directly expressing critical consciousness and a desire to take action?

### **Nascent Critical Consciousness: Critical Empathy and Critical Cultural Awareness**

There were a few moments in the dialogue journals when the students appeared to be heading toward a "critical cultural awareness—where they took a somewhat critical and analytical stance toward their experiences. These seemed to coincide with moments where they seemed to reach the limits of their empathy. In just a few instances, students discussed how their experiences would impact their future teaching practices—where they promised to take action to make things better for the immigrant students they would be serving.

No student's expression of critical cultural awareness lasted longer than one entry, none seemed to do more than gently hint at any awareness of systematic inequity or larger structures of power, and nothing explicit crossed over into post-course surveys or follow-up interviews. There was little to no uptake on any conversations that involved stepping through or beyond empathy for the plight of immigrants, ELL students, or Latinos in the U.S. into a broader understanding of poverty, hegemony, inequality, or race/class/linguicism.

At the same time, however, there were numerous places where students began to exhibit "critical empathy" (DeStigter, 1999), where they had an empathetic response to an experience but realized the limitations of their ability to truly identify with the situations of others. These expressions of critical empathy appeared to encourage students in the direction of critical cultural awareness; their response to a feeling of helplessness toward others' situations seemed to be to attempt some analysis or comparison with their own lives.

For example, nearly all of the students wrote with outrage about poverty in Mexico after they visited the home of a very poor single mother of four whose single-minded goal was to keep her children in school. In several of the following excerpts, the students seem to be groping for answers and beginning to envision their own roles as change-agents:

It was very frustrating to hear that she can't even start to save money because of the amount she makes and the money needed to support her family. It was inspiring to hear about her *lucha* (struggle) and see how much *esperanza* (hope) she has that things will eventually get better. Her and all of her children were glowing with happiness and smiles that definitely make me think twice before I start to complain here. It makes me wonder what we can do to help out our neighbors and question why el gobernador (*the governor/government*) lets their people live this way. Isn't there something that can be done? (Nadia, Week 4)

Nadia's empathetic emotional response, her acknowledgement of the vast distance between her own life experience and that of the family she is visiting, and her desire to find "something that can be done," imply the development of critical empathy (DeStigter, 1999), and her comparison between her own situation and the situation of this family implies some developing skills in critical cultural awareness (Byram et al, 2002). These steps appear to be moving her to consider larger causes for inequity and to move to action.

Similarly, Anita describes her experience as "muy (*very*) eye opening:"

*Todos los personas viven en esa una casa* (all the people live in one house) and are trying to get the best education that they can even though they are not given the best education and teachers because *están pobre* (they are poor). (Anita, Week 1)

As she begins to consider the tremendous barriers to success that society has placed in the path of this family in poverty, Anita explores critical empathy (DeStigter, 1999).

Kate too expresses the depth of her emotional response, and explicitly mentions the limits to her ability to understand the pain experienced by another person:

Hearing her cry and to think how much fear she must have had brought tears to my own eyes. *No puedo pensar la realidad...* (I cannot think about the reality).

Jessica likewise notes the limits of her own ability to empathize:

During this visit, I really started to feel very emotional and almost connected to her. Not connected in a sense that I understood what she was going through (because I really could never understand that kind of lacking she's experiencing), but that I really started to really like my eyes had been opened yet again. That seems to be a pattern here, but there is no other way for me to put it. I felt that

although she was lacking in physical possessions, she had more love and hope in heart than I have ever seen.

Jessica explicitly states that she "really could never understand" the experience of this impoverished Mexican woman, but that her attempts at empathizing with her are "opening" her eyes, as other experiences had also. Jessica's assertion that "she had more love and hope in her heart than I have ever seen" creates a subtle but powerful comparison between her own experiences and the experiences of the woman she was visiting, thus building her skills in critical cultural awareness.

Although the visit to the family living in poverty was particularly evocative for inspiring empathetic emotions, other study abroad experiences likewise led students toward critical cultural awareness (Byram et al, 2002). Jessica's reaction to viewing the film *Granito de Arena* begins to problematize the lack of access to public education in Mexico and the involvement of the business community in decision-making for schools, and to engage herself as a future teacher in changing the situation:

*Nunca he realizado el efecto de los negocios ponen en las escuelas. Por que no son cosas diferentes?? La educación es para la sociedad y para aprender como ser buenas personas; porque es tan difícil para obtener? Cuando sea maestra y tenga estudiantas mexicanas (especialmente) voy a recordar este video y sus problemas.*

(I never realized the effect that businesses have on schools. Why aren't things different? Education is for society and to learn how to be good people; why is it so difficult to obtain? When I am a teacher and I have Mexican students [especially] I will remember this video and its problems.)

Lauren expresses the limitations of her empathy as she shares a conversation she had with her host mother, about her son's challenges as an undocumented immigrant in the United States:

Gabriel missed his own father's funeral because he could not return to the United States if he went to Mexico. I could not imagine this type of sacrifice. I cannot imagine it is easy to be an illegal immigrant... It really helps to understand issues like this when you have a personal experience and to put yourself in someone else's position. Hearing the story of Gabriel gave me a much more personal connection to the people in the movie and really made it even more powerful for me.

Here Lauren makes a connection between the story of her host mother's son, and the film *Letters from the Other Side*, about

Mexican immigration and its impact on families left behind. In so doing she succinctly expresses the link between an emotional reaction of empathy, an ability to analytically compare her own experiences with others', and a developing critical consciousness.

Nadia, in telling a story about her unsuccessful attempts to exchange money at a Mexican "casa de cambio," compares her experience to that of a Mexican immigrant she observed trying to withdraw money at an American bank before she left home:

I was nervous to walk up to the exchange booth, confused and also a little frustrated. I wouldn't be surprised if the man in the bank that day was feeling some of the very same things. At least I constantly have someone with me who can translate or help me figure out what to say. I couldn't imagine living here on my own and trying to survive not knowing any Spanish. *Ese hombre es muy valiente.* (That man is very brave.)

Once again, as in the other examples above, Nadia acknowledges the limitations of her own empathy, and the vast distance between her experience and that of the man she observed—an acknowledgement that appears to begin to reflect upon these differences more analytically and to lead her on a path toward a more critical consciousness of the structures of inequality.

### Powerful Lasting Impacts

It seems reasonable to conclude that four weeks is simply too short a time for undergraduate students, most of whom had by their own admission never been outside their home state and many of whom described living very protected middle-class American lives, to develop a broad understanding of the role of power and status in maintaining inequity in classrooms and across international borders. Important things do take time.

However, the power of the students' reactions to their experiences in Mexico—in terms of the range and depth of empathy they were able to express—seems to hold value in itself. Students were suffering culture shock, most of them had limited language skills, and they were exhausted and overwhelmed by a very full schedule. In fact, all but two—Rebecca and Surjit—voluntarily opted out of a second week interning in a Mexican school setting, expressing stress, frustration and fatigue as their reasons for retreating to the relative safety of the Spanish language school instead.

Yet, clearly throughout the dialogue

journals all participants grappled with important questions. They reflected on the ways their own experiences coincided with or illuminated the experiences of immigrants in the U.S. They pushed themselves to try the uncomfortable, to explore the new, and to make connections that they could hold onto. So, what then were the lasting impacts of this experience on these future teachers?

During the summer of 2010, three years after their return from Mexico, the first author made an effort to contact the seven preservice teacher participants for follow-up interviews. Five responded—Lauren, Rebecca, Jessica, Anita, and Surjit—and answered questions either electronically (i.e., in writing) or in person. All five were employed full time as teachers, and all five spoke positively about their experiences in Mexico. In response to a general question, whether/how their Mexico trip had a long-term impact on them or their work, all five students said yes, and offered a range of examples.

Teaching as a fourth grade ESL teacher in a Central Texas urban school comprised almost entirely of Mexican immigrant Spanish-speaking students, Lauren responded immediately to our emailed request for follow-up feedback, and foremost on her mind was the empathy she developed in her study-abroad experience and the ways that has impacted her as a teacher:

My experience there really opened my eyes to how things are in Mexico for students and their families. It also helped me to be more understanding of how it is for students once they are in our schools here in America. I know firsthand how it is to be in a country where you aren't very confident in the language, because that was me! It was a great experience and I'm so glad I was able to participate. It made me more aware of the lives these students have in their home country and once they are here in America. (Electronic communication, 7/31/10)

Later in a personal interview recorded in our field notes, Lauren was able to give specific examples of her application of empathy garnered in Mexico to her current situation. Here is one:

She [Lauren] tells me about a child last year who came directly from Mexico and was in her mentor's bilingual classroom. Her mentor shared her frustration with him: "I don't know why it is that when he walks down the hall he HAS to bang on the walls. It's like he just can't help it!" She describes her own process of thinking back to her visit to the Mexican primary school,

the chaos that was prevalent on the play yard, the concrete walls that withstood any amount of banging without anyone noticing or caring, and the complete lack of any structured way to move from one room to another. She explained these differences to her mentor, and it helped both of them to have more empathy for the child as he learned the ropes in a new culture. (field notes, unrecorded personal interview, 8/10/10)

Lauren's ability to articulate for her colleague the different experiences this student might have had that could be leading to his behaviors are a clear demonstration of critical cultural awareness (Byram et al, 2002), which she asserts emerged directly from her experiences in Mexico.

Jessica expressed the impact that a school visit to a high school geometry classroom in Mexico had on her current level of empathy for her ELL high school students in their efforts to learn mathematics:

It was amazing that as a mathematics major, I couldn't understand what the teacher was explaining! I then was humbled as a teacher with my students who can't speak English. Their effort at such a higher level than the other students just to get past the language barrier. (Electronic communication, 9/20/10)

In more general terms, Jessica described her desire to learn from one of the guest speakers and the limits her Spanish abilities placed on that learning:

As a teacher, the one thing that has stuck with me the most was our history lesson with an older gentleman as our teacher telling his life story. It was such an interesting story and I wanted so badly to understand every word and experience he had to share but it was incredibly difficult as my Spanish had not reached his level of fluency. This affects me as a teacher because I teach quite a few students that are "newcomers" from foreign countries and I can definitely understand that the desire to learn is there while the definite language barrier can prohibit the learning experience greatly. (Electronic communication, 9/20/10)

Jessica's ability to make connections between her own experiences in Mexico and her students in Texas impacts her daily teaching in ways that must ultimately benefit her immigrant students.

Anita, currently working as a kindergarten teacher in a multicultural urban Texas school, describes the impact the study-abroad experience had on her current work as a teacher:

Because of the experience that I had in

Mexico, ... I can truly understand how my English Language Learner students process information on a daily basis. I understand how important visuals are and also how it can be frustrating at times when you are unable to communicate what you are trying to say. Overall it was an amazing experience that continues to help me in my career as a teacher.

Anita's direct experience as a Spanish language learner in Mexico allowed her to empathize with her ELL students, and she feels that this understanding has helped her to reach and teach her students.

In her follow-up interview, Rebecca, one of the two participants who had decided despite adversity to stay in her Mexican internship placement, reported that her Mexican experience was not in fact directly relevant to her current work. She currently teaches upper-elementary grades in a small private boarding school for emotionally disturbed boys (all native English speakers) in distant New Hampshire.

She sat talking with the first author for over an hour expressing joys and frustrations about various aspects of her current work and reminiscing about how much she learned in Mexico, yet struggled to find any way in which her experiences in Mexico connected with what she was currently doing. Eventually, she offered the following, describing the impact the study-abroad experience had upon her ability to take on travel and distant challenges in a new environment (northern New England):

If I hadn't done the [study-abroad trip], I don't think I would have had the nerve to move to New Hampshire. So it prepared me that way!" (unrecorded personal interview, 8/1/10)

Thus, although her experiences in Mexico did not directly prepare her for rural New Hampshire, her experience taking risks did perhaps help her make another leap into an unfamiliar cultural context.

## Conclusion

### Implications and Recommendations

It is clear to us that more research needs to occur in order to follow students for a longer time, track their reactions to different types of experiences, discern the influences of study-abroad experiences on future teaching, and uncover in more detail the ways in which the development of empathy and the skills of critical cultural awareness can serve as bridges to critical consciousness.

It would certainly have been valuable to have additional sources of data to better explore these issues. However, this was the first time the College of Education at this institution sponsored a study-abroad program. Our intention was to return to Mexico the following year with a new group of students and conduct a more thorough study, including recordings of class discussions and comprehensive field notes. Unfortunately, circumstances changed, and we were unable to carry out that plan.

These limitations mean that our findings must be viewed as limited as well; we can only suggest possible connections between reaching the limits of empathy, exploring critical cultural awareness (Byram et al, 2002), and developing critical consciousness (Freire, 2000) that must be explored in other studies. And truthfully, our findings are fairly inconclusive since none of our preservice teacher participants made a clear leap to critical consciousness, either during or after their stay in Mexico.

Nevertheless, this study explores the potential of study abroad, even short-term study abroad, when combined with reflective journaling, to help preservice teachers make connections between their own experiences and those of their future students. It begins to examine the types of experiences while abroad that may have more potential to trigger engagement for preservice teachers.

It seems that when students confront situations extremely different from their own, or when they are faced with people whose lives are vastly more difficult, they must themselves admit to the limits of their empathy. This admission seems to shake students' assumptions about their own cultures, attitudes, and behaviors, and to push them toward critical cultural awareness, or the skill of analytically comparing their own culture, behavior, and assumptions to those of others (Byram et al, 2002).

In a few cases, and when pushed to reflect, students appear to seek answers in structures beyond the individuals involved, thus beginning to develop a broader critical consciousness (Freire, 2000). As uncomfortable as such confrontations with the limits of empathy can be, we would like to suggest that they may potentially offer students the greatest gain. Empathy does indeed appear to be a good place to start in the development of skills crucial to future teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse children.

Yet in order for a program such as the

one described and studied here to more effectively support students to develop critical cultural awareness (Byram et al, 2002) and potentially critical consciousness (Freire, 2000), we recommend a specific focus on these concepts along with more time for discussion and reflective journaling.

Reflection through journals allowed these students to integrate many of their experiences; yet the single strongest complaint from participants was that they felt overwhelmed, not just from the limits of their empathy but also from pure exhaustion. While experiences are key, time to integrate these experiences is crucial, and offering preservice teachers the language to define and to process their experiences has the potential to move them more quickly toward integration and synthesis.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some of this research involved new language teachers participating in year-long exchange programs.

<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the study participants.

<sup>3</sup> Originally the program was planned to include two weeks of intern experience for all students. However, the intern experience proved so challenging to many students, due to language and cultural barriers and their own lack of intercultural skills, that the instructor and program coordinator offered them the option to return to Spanish language classes in the final week. All but two preservice teachers took this option.

<sup>4</sup> We have not corrected dialogue journal excerpts for grammar, vocabulary, or spelling.

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