

immersion pedagogy models I've seen recommend debriefing, reviewing the timeline of events of the day, sharing feelings, raising questions, and more. Where do these daily debriefing narratives include room for voices and perspectives beyond the immersion course participants?

Another opportunity to practice sharing power or to imagine practicing sharing power is when, inevitably, immersion course participants begin to compare their prior experience with their immersion course experience. In my immersion pedagogy experiences, this routinely occurs around food, gardening, eldercare, childcare, marriage, transportation, trash collection, refrigeration, cooking methods, the color of certain fruits (e.g., green oranges or white sweet potatoes), water systems, architecture, translation, health care, education, dental care, surgical follow up, entrepreneurship, and more. Opportunities to share power arise alongside the urge to say, "but that's not how it's done." Decolonizing immersion pedagogy stands ready to interrogate claim about "the right way" to do the thing in question. Who decides? How has this thing changed over time? Destabilizing basic needs and familiar practices sustained even over a short period of time (1-2 weeks) is one of the difficulties of immersion pedagogy in practice. However, even one day is long enough to spark at least one observational comparison. Curate immersion experiences that have room to practice sharing power and practice inviting the desire to share power within the rhythms of the course itself.

(6) *Practice Preparing the Post-Immersion Narrative Curation:* All members of an immersion class will reengage their life after the immersion experience. The extent to which the immersion experience is integrated into life at home will vary; yet, even a decision to hold the immersion experience at bay is a post-immersion experience narrative curation. I have increasingly decided to practice post-immersion narrative curation within the framework of the course itself. For their final course project, one Doctor of Ministry immersion class to Nicaragua curated a

temporary art exhibit at a seminary conference that occurred six months after the immersion experience. Mixed media projects from quilts to digital media to broken pottery to collage narrated the immersion experience in multiple ways. In addition, the assignment raised the issue of curation for the class in a new way, especially knowing that conference attendees might only ever experience the immersion experience host country through the students' representations of it. In other classes, I have experimented with public theology blogs, worship services and liturgies, and educational events as practices of addressing curation of the immersion experience that lives on beyond the constraints of the class itself or the curated learning environment during the immersion course. Curate immersion experiences that anticipate issues of curation that participants will engage after the course is over.

The risks of harm are clear and present in all immersion learning experiences. Part of the prelude to decolonizing immersion pedagogy involves bringing these everyday risks and harms into plain view in the constructing of the very narrative of what is going on in an immersion course. Therefore, decolonizing immersion pedagogies require curating immersion experiences that respect and engage these risks as part of the structure and schedule of the learning environment. For example, students in immersion courses are often surprised to find happy, playing children in contexts of extreme poverty. Countless immersion participants have been moved to tears at receiving hospitality that is much more extravagant than they expected and that they have considered offering to strangers themselves. Beautiful stories of human survival exist in the most difficult places I've immersed myself and students. However, sometimes immersion participants can linger in these astonishing experiences of survival and thriving seemingly against all odds (Occhipinti, 2014, p. 48ff). Lonetree (2012) writes that "it is time...to acknowledge the painful aspects of our history along with our stories of survivance...we fail to provide the context that

makes...survival one of the greatest untold stories” (p.6). Decolonizing immersion pedagogy aims to make space for radical listening on all sides of harm.

Movement 3: Awakening to “all sides of harm”

This article opens with four representative quotations from various immersion learning experiences I have helped to curate as a professor of pastoral theology and ethics.¹⁶ In a local immersion, a student exclaims with both curiosity and deep frustration that they never knew about what they were encountering *right here* in a familiar hometown that they thought they knew well. In an international immersion, after seven flights, one train ride, and countless miles in a shared van, a student laments the environmental impact and issues an invitation for all participants to purchase a carbon offset. Another student wonders in a new way how supportive their own group members will be during more vulnerable parts of the immersion experience, especially when not all group members have proved to be trustworthy on campus in other class settings. In an international immersion experience planning session, I asked a host partner whether the financial resources needed to travel with students to facilitate an in-person immersion encounter was worth it or whether the financial impact would be better served as a donation to the community’s expressed needs for an ambulance, which we could underwrite with the same amount of money

All four of these queries represent predictable harms in immersion pedagogy: exposing the limits of previous knowledge, environmental impact, weathering trust within the group of travelers, and the exploitative risk of access to stories over and against a project funding model of international service. Decolonizing immersion pedagogy involves awakening to what Amy Lonetree calls all sides of harm. I am not yet convinced that the risks of immersion classes are

¹⁶ The quotations are my own, composites of various student quotations, or attributed to students who asked to remain anonymous while also giving me permission to quote them.

insurmountable and maybe in due time I will change my mind. I do have to constantly evaluate the extent to which my own set of embodied and social privileges—my whiteness, my enormous educational access, my United States citizenship, my job security and the fact that my participation in the experiences I describe are funded by tuition and donor dollars, and more—contribute to my argument in favor of immersion pedagogy and faith in my ability to practice my own commitments to decolonizing immersion pedagogy.

If I am to advocate for and practice this powerful kind of learning, I must also commit to decolonizing immersion pedagogy. I must recognize that my vocation of teaching and learning, reading and writing, speaking and listening, grading and assigning books, and more, contribute to practices that have been managed historically as more accessible to some and less accessible or even illegal for others. In other words, the vocation of formal learning itself is complicit in dehumanizing geographies and must be charted (Smith, 2012). I learn, develop, edit, and rely on guidelines for curating immersion experiences that will host experiences of awakening for myself, my students, and the multiple connections we foster, give, receive and, yes, resist, in immersion learning. To this end, decolonizing immersion pedagogy also requires the deliberative practices of awakening to all sides of harm.

I rely on many mentors and guides as necessary accountability partners in my movement toward more fully practicing decolonizing immersion pedagogy, as I am a novice and make important mistakes that require my sustained attention (Sharp, 2013). In this article, I engage historian Amy Lonetree as conversation partner. Lonetree (2012) does not advocate the dissolution of museums in decolonizing them; rather she advocates institutional “transformation on all sides

of harm” (p.5).¹⁷ Describing examples of long fought but not yet achieved indigenous body part repatriation and the newer more well-intentioned yet still not yet realized power sharing in the American Indian Smithsonian Museum’s nearly two decades of planning and embodiment at its opening in 2004, she explains just how hard it is to share power using the contents of museums as one narrative medium for sharing stories of a community’s pasts, presents, and futures.

The multiplicity implied here suggests a decolonizing intention, as colonizing like the Christian equivalent of crusade implies a discrete and discernable right side and wrong side, a sacred dualism of the right and wrong, the good and bad, the saved and unsaved. Immersion classes disrupt dualistic fantasies. In contrast, decolonizing immersion pedagogies are inherently multiple. I recently asked some residential students to name the people they would want to talk to in order to find out what’s going on at the US-Mexico border. In thirty minutes, a room of about thirty graduate theological students named over eighty discrete persons they could imagine meeting with to learn more about what is going on and to help awaken to the ways in which knowledge is formed, communicated, and challenged. There are not two and only two sides of immigration; rather, from these students residential thought experiment, and from my many years talking with all different kinds of people from all different political persuasions who live on both sides of the US-Mexico border, it is evident that the issues of our day are complicated. Likewise, visiting Dalit Christian communities in India complicate caste; visiting and talking with domestic workers in Costa Rica complicate labor issues in Nicaragua; and Nicaraguan migrants complicate immigration dynamics on the US-Mexico border. There are no simple dualisms within dynamic issues and places with a long history of violence and human migration.

¹⁷ Similarly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012 c. 1999) argues for decolonizing research methods as a process of transforming research, not doing away with research, and likewise Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel (2015) argue not for the end of eating, but rather for decolonizing practices around harvesting and consuming food.

However, decolonizing immersion pedagogy also challenges the notion of innocent bystander better than almost every other pedagogical innovation I have tried on campus, online, or in retreat settings (those these are also necessary and promising contexts for decolonizing pedagogies to be sure). For example, practices around food, clothing, and labor are immediately implicated and complexified in immersion visits to free trade zones in NAFTA and CAFTA regulatory landscapes (Brubaker, 2007). For this reason, my border theology immersion courses tend to commit to eat vegetarian, which for some students proves difficult after the first few days of the immersive learning environment. When traveling to India, the US-Mexico border, Nicaragua, or even a one-day mini local immersion, participants long for the familiar: a coca cola, a visit to Walmart or McDonald's, or some other very specific longing. Awakening to these desires is also instructive in the long process of awakening on all sides of harm that supports decolonizing immersion pedagogy.

It is important to consider how to curate the "narrative after" of an immersion course. Curating immersion experiences includes discerning how, whether, and when to structure in material purchases: a sari from India, painted pottery or silver and turquoise jewelry from Mexico, spices, or traditional dress are often the examples given alongside participant requests for souvenir shopping that exceeds what is planned in the itinerary, and more. Here again, Amy Lonetree is an important conversation partner. What kind of objects will help communicate the complexities of awakening to all sides of harm that can and often do begin to stir in immersion courses? What objects do I desire to buy and are glad to see marketed for sale? When is this disrupted for me and how do I respond? When a student is concerned about the inherent traps of representation in buying and then wearing at home clothing that is indigenous to a particular region, ought they purchase from a sustainable source and then use the material object to help communicate the dilemma they

face or shall they refrain from participating in the local economy while traveling in an immersion seminar? Decolonizing immersion pedagogy refuses to answer this question with a simple and clear right and wrong, but rather allows the question to linger complexly as part of the purpose of the learning environment.

Transformation on all sides of harm requires awakening to the complexity of experience and complexities of power sharing. As mentioned above practicing power sharing, much less sustaining power sharing, is difficult. Power sharing must be intentionally demanded and desired over and over again. I once heard theologian Roberta Bondi advise that if one were having trouble praying, one might pray for the desire to pray. And if that desire feels far away, one might pray for an awakening of the desire to pray for the desire to pray (Bondi, 2017). Decolonizing immersion pedagogy carries a similarly inherent spirituality of awakening power sharing: share power or if that is not yet possible, connect to the desire to share power, or if that is not yet possible, pray for an awakening of the desire to share power.

At once, the genre of immersion holds decolonizing potential right alongside ever-present risks of shoring up and contributing to colonization. Immersion pedagogy holds amazing potential to allow experience to hold significant weight in the learning process. This highlights that learning is itself experience, even while it adds experiential elements to a traditional classroom environment. Simultaneously, the experience is both about recognition and complicity. There needs to be room to process even while recognizing that time and space for structured processing (experiencing, then retreating from intensity of experience in order to write a paper, journal prompt, or other reporting about the impact of the experience in actual daily life back home) is a privilege. This privilege maintains the fiction of dualism and literally builds and continually renovates the structure to maintain fantasy. Radical truth-telling can interrupt such a fantasy.

Actually engaging the living human web undoes the potential work of empathy, mutuality, and healing. Yet, to enter and then leave breaks down the fantastic dualism as going home provides an opportunity to begin to see the pervasive “object of study” dissolve into greater complexities that resist any simple dualisms.

No one perspective or cultural identity, no one contextual boundary or institutional arrangement, can open anyone or any community into knowing cross-contextual capacities for healing and harming. Both healing and harming intersect and unfold within and especially across embodied constraints of life together. Immersion pedagogy—structures and habits of learning intentionally placed at border-crossings and intersections of cultures and contexts—provides access into the kind of learning that supports practices of naming resistances.

The phrase “transformation on all sides of harm” suggests that complicity in harm and/or experiences of harm is currently inescapable and in urgent need of transformation. Who wants to live and learn in the midst of complicities embedded in daily life practices? Or, better, why seek to do so? I believe that igniting desires to lean into the heart of resistance provides an antidote to the habitual and strategic forgetting that serves to fortify today’s colonizing violence, a violence increasing in visibility and strength. Immersion pedagogy ought to serve the goal of social transformation by empowering participation in decolonization as the primary learning objective. What are some decolonizing possibilities in immersion pedagogy?

Movement 4: Decolonizing possibilities

Radical (n.d., Dictionary.com)

adjective

1. of or going to the root or origin; fundamental
2. thoroughgoing or extreme, especially as regards change from accepted or traditional forms

3. favoring drastic political, economic, or social reform

Decolonizing immersion pedagogy promises to empower “transformation on all sides of harm” by refusing to minimize attention to risk, power, and privilege in the learning environment. These pedagogical commitments pave the way for co-learners to move into radical truth-telling, a key instrument of decolonization. Practices like charting dehumanizing geographies, curating immersion experiences, and awakening to all sides of harm help decolonizing immersion pedagogy unfold in the planning, experiencing, and debriefing of immersion courses in theological education. These practices share a commitment to radical listening at the intersection of multiple narratives, connect ethics and emotions, and support possibilities of a decolonizing process. The following paragraphs take up these three themes.

The process of radical listening in immersion pedagogy is vital to decolonization because of at least five converging factors: (1) it invites all participants into a decentered position, (2) it unmasks instability of histories through experiential intersections with multiple narratives, (3) it invites participant vulnerabilities and complicities into the learning process, (4) it necessitates attention to intersectionality, or reduction of experiential dynamics to single issue or dualistic phenomena (Crenshaw, 1989, pp. 145 & 149), in practice as well as theory, and (5) it exposes a myth of preparation that tempts to privilege fantasizing over living in immersion pedagogy. Each factor depends on cultivating a practice of radical listening to oneself, to the immersion experience community, and to much broader narratives.

Why radical listening? As cited above, the word radical means “going to the root” for the sake of transformative change. It means examining practices of learning through travel in which teachers and learners encounter people and places well outside the traditional classroom from the sake of transformation but shaped by factors that require humility, self-awareness, and a posture

of uncertainty. It not only raises questions of inclusion and exclusion in the learning environment, but attempts to cross borders of inclusion and exclusion within the learning environment itself, making listening more challenging, more radical, and more morally imperative so that the immersion experience is not an end in itself, but a means to deeper change over time.

In addition to radical listening, decolonizing possibilities unfold at many intersections, including intersections between emotions and ethics. Because the use of the body through travel and shared living conditions is more prominent than in traditional 3.0 credit hour courses on-campus or online, boundaries and emotions both need to be explicitly welcomed and structured throughout the immersion experience. On the one hand, this can cause some confusion since maintaining healthy boundaries is urgent at the same time that the course requires crossing borders. On the other hand, discussing boundaries of time, space, and relational negotiation explicitly and regularly helps facilitate the necessary border crossing. For example, roommate assignments are one host to intersections of emotions and ethics. Who should and should not room together? How would an instructor find out?

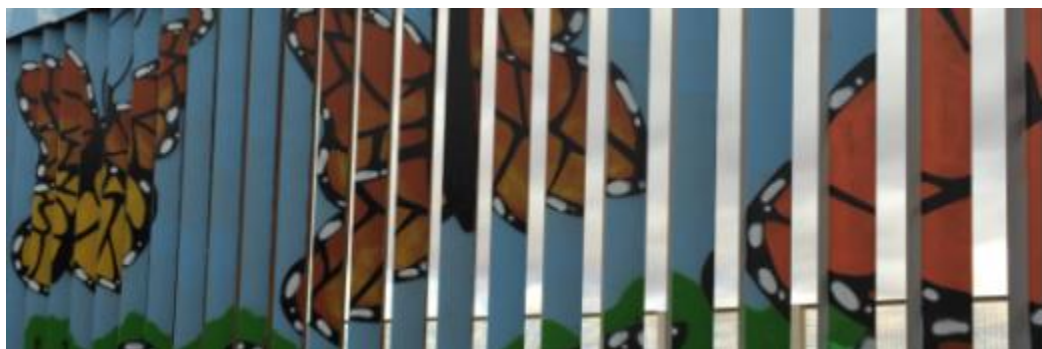
What do participants have to disclose and what self-identifying information can be held in confidence, from sexual identities to allergies to histories of mental illness? Should roommates change so as to catch any unhealthy or potentially toxic situations such as the formation of cliques, sleep preferences, personality conflicts, or more worrisome dynamics? When should a participant need to leave the immersion event? Is the professor ever “off”? Should alcohol be allowed at restaurants at all? What about when there are survivors of alcoholism in the room? How to welcome students of various financial means without outing class? How does the class negotiate internal and internalized racism that might unfold not only in the whole group but also in roommate situations? How are host families chosen and who goes where? How many of these and other

questions and concerns should be shared and negotiated with all participants? These are just a few of the many questions that evoke emotional engagement and require a clear sense of moral engagement in curating immersion experiences and often moral imagination in the moment. Students can be transformed when they are provoked to have a psychological reaction, from ecstatic insight to depressive lament, through and beyond the learning environment. Yet, this is also an ethical question. How are learning objectives oriented toward transformation met?

Decolonization is not a quick project, but rather a long process. Decolonizing immersion pedagogy is also a long process. The four practices I describe in this paper arise from my own experience with immersion pedagogy and form for me part of the crucial prelude to the longer, deeper work of decolonizing practices. Immersion pedagogy also serves as such an invitation for students. How, therefore, does course design include support for the longer-term process of incorporating invitations to transformation more broadly than one class or one degree program at one point in time? Where emotional engagement arises alongside the urgency of an invitation into this lifelong work, how do immersion courses support participants through the challenges of immersion experiences so that a deeper participation is possible and more likely?

Finally, possibilities of a decolonizing process include deliberate movements from colonizing strategies to decolonizing strategies. Again, Lonetree (2012) is instructive. In the case of museums, decolonizing strategies aim for making museums more accessible and communally relevant (p.1). In and beyond museums, rather than talking *about* or *depicting* indigenous communities, decolonizing strategies value and practice partnerships, denounce stereotypical representations, challenge any decision made by only one person, advocate for repatriation of cultural objects, and combine education with activism (pp. xi, xiii, & 17). When learning about and crossing borders, decolonizing strategies question the role and implication of colonial

violence, expand sources of knowledge, lament broken treaties, and expose genocidal policies (pp.xii, 9, & 120). Learning about death and dead bodies is placed in a context of family histories, “complex subjectivity,” historical trauma and unresolved grief (pp.3, 5, & 11). In general, colonizing strategies freeze human narratives, relationships, and histories into simple, dualistic, static forms, while decolonizing strategies welcome a range of emotional, historical, multi-vocal engagement with past, present, and future. These decolonizing possibilities, alongside radical listening and attention to intersections of emotional engagement with moral imagination contribute to transformative immersion pedagogies in theological education.



photograph taken by Mindy McGarrah Sharp in Sonora, Mexico, looking into Arizona, US

Learning with butterflies and ants: Concluding thoughts on a prelude

As a theological educator who continues to learn and lead through immersion learning, I wonder, is immersion pedagogy harmful, helpful, or both? I check in with hosts and presenters who share their vulnerability with my traveling students and myself, asking “is it worth it?” I am convinced that invitations into unlikely relationships with partners who will never be published in academic libraries mitigates the risks of exploitation. But I must remain mindful that each immersion experience invites just a few pieces of relational growth into the overall ecology of a life lived together in solidarity across borders. In this article, I argue that immersion pedagogy can hold open

space for radical listening and offers a promising prelude into transformative practices of decolonization. I have learned to adopt an immersion pedagogy that includes displacement alongside practices of radical listening in all its messiness, resistances, and urgencies. Immersion pedagogy can serve a goal of social transformation by empowering participation in possibilities of decolonization as a learning goal piece by piece and without pretending to grasp the whole.

Physicists have shown through the butterfly effect that a butterfly's wing can move an ocean (Gleick, 1987); at the beginning of the article I share my experience of seeing a museum wall move in response to patron curiosities. Amy Lonetree (2012), historian and inspiration in my reflections on decolonizing immersion pedagogy, argues that transformation on all sides of harm unfolds where humanity is "visibly moved while remembering" (p.xiv). Transformation is always sparked by the human experience of being moved to change in the face of what is haunting and/or beautiful. By design, immersion pedagogy haunts and beautifies participants physically, emotionally, and relationally. I believe that immersion pedagogy is also infinitely invitational, moving participants toward deeper engagement well beyond any one immersion course. Can immersion learning also be transformative?

I argue in this article that for immersion pedagogy to be transformative it also must enter a process of decolonizing itself as a pedagogical method, to cross borders and to invite movement into seemingly fixed places. Museum walls that move illustrate the permeability of borders crisscrossed with privileges and restrictions of access. Butterflies are often seen as expert border crossers in that they can crawl and fly through and above walls, and even cross borders between life forms in their own lifecycle. On the border wall between Sonora, Mexico, and Arizona, United States, a seemingly immovable wall, butterflies are painted on the beams. Instead of the usual rust

of static metal structures, the wall bar background matches the Sonoran Desert blue sky. Is it cruel and/or liberative to mark walls with signs of moving transformation?

Immersion pedagogy is not about distancing a mythical over there fantasy world from a mythical right here and now. Immersion is a description of decolonizing practices. I advocate for immersion pedagogy within theological education as oriented toward living not fantasizing. Immersion sharpens my and my students' radical listening on all sides of harm, weaving complicities and transformative possibilities as the norm of human life: seminary learning, church leadership, and indeed, human relationships are all immersion experiences. And the sharpening can serve both healing and wounding.

At once, the genre of immersion holds decolonizing potential right alongside ever-present risks of shoring up and contributing to colonization. Immersion pedagogy holds amazing potential to allow experience to hold significant weight in the learning process. This highlights that learning is experience even while it adds experiential elements to a traditional classroom environment. Even though immersion pedagogy depends on displacement, it is designed to be time-limited. The course ends; co-learners return home. Paradoxically, immersion at its best paves the way for participation in decolonization over time.

How do leaders prepare for the invisible and contested border crossings that are navigated across the thresholds of our lives together? While I've not yet learned to cross borders with the butterfly, I have been moved by its inspiration. The butterfly effect could indeed move a museum wall through physicality and collective inspiration. In the meantime, inspired by the butterfly, I can learn and lead in community with the physical and metaphorical ants. Throughout liberation theologies and organizing efforts, the ant symbolizes how little by little, person by person, piece by piece, the universe moves and is moved. To me, an ant representing a decolonizing perspective

attentive to listening to all sides of harm is the pedagogical commitment into which I move when I teach by immersion. Ants are not solo travelers; they depend on each other to move whole picnics one watermelon seed at a time. I only have to remember unwittingly stepping into red mounds of anthill in my childhood to know the collective movement of ants. Immersion pedagogy awakens the pieces I carry alongside all other carriers of stories, histories, and hopes. In a recent immersion course, a student began to learn the significance of ants depicted in public art by saying out loud, “I thought that was just an ant!” Yes, it’s an ant on the move carrying a vital piece of transformative possibilities. Immersion courses can be the crucial prelude to participating in the decolonizing possibilities that arise in such small but mighty collective movements oriented toward constructing a new world.

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