Going Where Nobody Should Go: Experiential Learning without Making the World Your Classroom

Robert Huish, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Dalhousie University
Canada

Keywords: solidarity; activism; activist pedagogy; locally-based global engagement; political advocacy

ABSTRACT: It raised many questions when students at Dalhousie University were asked, as part of an experiential learning class assignment, to help someone escape North Korea in 2015. When students organized human rights protests, fundraised for a rescue team within China to escort refugees to safety and engaged politicians on North Korean refugee needs, it challenged the norms of experiential learning in a university setting. Is political engagement appropriate for the classroom? Should Canadian students even get involved with such complex human rights and political issues? Most importantly, could this experience still be considered experiential learning if the students never met the North Korean refugee? If they never went there? And if they organized their efforts all entirely in the classroom for credit? In this paper, I argue that actions of solidarity can have an important place in experiential learning. The paper explains the classroom experience of building solidarity with vulnerable populations a world away, and argues that deep values of solidarity can emerge from the classroom, even to places that are impossible to go to.

Introduction

“This semester, not only are we going to explore a complicated and poorly understood human rights crisis, we are going to help someone get out of it”. This was the introduction to a 3rd year International Development Studies class at Dalhousie University in September 2015. The instructor went on to say that the students would have the opportunity to become deeply involved with an important issue, to make real connections, to be engaged, to reflect on their participation and to change the life of one person forever. “We’re going to get a person out of North Korea and to safety in Seoul”.

Silence.

“Excuse me, professor, did you say that we are going to bust someone out of North Korea? Isn’t that place really screwed up”?

“Yes, that is right. A human rights organization asked us to help build awareness on the issue and to raise funds to help rescue a North Korean refugee from the border, to then go through China into another country and then into a third country before reaching the Republic of Korea embassy in Bangkok, Thailand. This is an optional activity, and anyone who does not want to participate in this exercise is welcome to pursue an alternative curriculum within the course. But if you’ll allow me 40 minutes to explain the issue at hand and our potential role within it, I invite you to then make your decision”.

By the end of the lecture on September 8, 2015, 70 students had signed up for the Camp 14 Project—a student-organized initiative to support the struggles of North Korean refugees. In December 2015, the students supported the rescue of a North Korean refugee who is now safely in Seoul (Camp 14 Project, 2015).

In this article, I discuss the experiences and outcomes of this 3rd year International Development Studies class I offered during the 2015 fall semester at Dalhousie University. I provide this account in order to contribute to ongoing discussions about the place of experiential learning in higher education (Rennick & Desjardins, 2013b; Thobani, 2007; Tiessen & Huish, 2014). Notably, a growing body of literature successfully critiques the ethical challenges of experiential learning, particularly with regard to how, or if, students and communities mutually benefit (Epprecht, 2004; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Langdon & Agyeyomah, 2014; Thobani, 2007).

This paper contributes to the discussion by asking if these ethical concerns would be resolved if students stayed in their place, rather than travelling the world for learning experiences. Are the ethical challenges of experiential learning just about the movement of people, or is there a deeper concern about how students engage in politics regardless of whether they travel abroad to do it? It also discusses the shortcomings of pursuing what I call “stationary global connectivity,” meaning the forming of relationships with others through methods other than travel, and whether approaches to combine learning with action actually yield completely favourable outcomes. I also discuss the challenges of teaching “activism” as part of experiential learning and global citizenship pedagogy (Huish, 2013). The term “activism” is increasingly more common in global citizenship courses (Forenza & Germak, 2015; Lagos, 2007; Schugurensky & Myers, 2003). As Ratnam (2009) states, there is “considerable interest in global citizenship discourse with claims that grassroots activism founded the global citizenship movement” (p. 71). But, do university administrations really feel comfortable with activism? Or do they merely feel comfortable with the idea of it? The goal of this paper is to argue that while educators continue to struggle with the balance between the ethics of, and the demands for, experiential learning, pedagogies of activism and solidarity may provide important
counterpoints for new approaches to this learning. However, as the experience of the Camp 14 Project demonstrates, activist pedagogy involves a unique set of challenges and ethical concerns to which universities are unaccustomed to dealing with at an institutional level. While there is a rich literature and history of participatory pedagogy in citizenship education and democracy, the focus on this chapter is specifically on the relationship of the experiential learning model to activism, rather than other tried and proven models (Daly, Schugrurensky, & Lopes, 2009). The main point of this article is that faculty should worry less about crafting the perfect experiential program to meet a list of demands from students or administrators, and instead focus more on crafting space for critical discussion and active engagement about activism within the classroom.

**Going Beyond “Humanitarians of Tinder”**

In the simplest sense, “experiential learning” implies learning from doing, rather than through didactic lecture settings (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993). This provides a wide berth of learning settings, ranging from “learning on-the-job” co-op placements, to international voluntourism opportunities (Bamber & Hankin, 2011). While experience-gaining co-op placements continue to be popular within higher education, the practice of volunteerism is increasingly associated by university administrations to the idea of global citizenship (Bailie Smith & Laurie, 2011; Nussbaum, 2002). Such international service learning is often positioned by university marketing teams as a means to foster leadership and that volunteer students themselves can solve the world’s problems, even though numerous scholars have successfully debunked these claims (Heron, 2000; Mostafanezhad, 2013; Vrasti, 2013). As Tiessen and Huish (2014) write, “international experiential learning programs therefore provide a valuable opportunity for reflecting on how much we need to learn about the world around us and the importance of global competency for good citizenship. Learning/volunteer abroad programs also provide rich opportunities for understanding the causes of inequality and finding ways to work in solidarity with our partners in the Global South to challenge and circumvent structures of inequality” (p. 4). In this sense, international experiential learning that provides international travel, volunteerism, cross-cultural dialogue and for-credit learning becomes very attractive for university administrators (Bird, 2016; Queen’s Gazette, 2013). Students demand such opportunities, and universities present these experiences as unconditionally positive learning forums for students.

As much as learning outcomes can be incredibly positive for students, a great deal of concern exists regarding the ethics of these programs and their ability to actually encourage more harm than good (Baker-Bosamra, 2006; Reilly & Senders, 2009; Tiessen, 2013). The literature abounds with critiques about the moral shortcomings of international experiential learning. Reilly and Senders (2009) claim that it is troubling to use low-resource communities as teaching settings for affluent students. McGloin and Georgeou (2015) discuss the impacts volunteerism has on communities, and how marginalized settings are transformed into teaching forums. Huish (2012) argues that medical schools
are particularly problematic, as serious ethical dilemmas occur when under-qualified and under-confident students are encouraged to go beyond their comfort zones and practice on patients in low-resources settings. Some cases involved social science students stitching up patients in Honduras—a practice that would result in several criminal charges if done in North America (Bradke, 2009). Quenville’s (2015) documentary Volunteers Unleashed makes an important point about how these volunteer placements are represented, both in terms of university marketing, and how they are represented in social media. The critical blog, “Humanitarians of Tinder” (2016), searches a famous dating app to shame voluntourists who post exploitative field photos in the hopes of finding a romantic partner.

The main concern is that an exploitative factor exists in positioning voluntourism education within resource-poor settings (Rotabi, Roby, & Bunkers, 2015). Voluntourism can be understood as a form of tourism in which travelers dedicate time to community-level volunteering. However, voluntourism usually entails a self-serving consumerist ethics in which the volunteer is consuming the community experience in a similar sort of way that they would consume other activities on holiday. It implies that the experience is catered to the demands of the volunteer/consumer and does not connect to a deeper level of global citizenship. Both the practices of volunteering and the representation of it invite room for exploitative narratives and colonialist representations of the “other” and the “saviour” (Marbach, 2016). This concern is growing in both scholarly and popular literature. Documentaries are even illuminating the real dangers of this educational model (Ruhfus, 2012; Quenville, 2015).

Volunteering for-credit domestically can also present a set of challenges for both volunteers and host organizations. Some organizations complain that receiving volunteers who are “forced” to be there actually puts additional strain on their resources and operations. Likewise, students who feel obligated to volunteer may not experience it as positive a learning experience as those who volunteer by their own choice. Some studies suggest that students from low-resource settings, or students who face learning difficulties and who are required to volunteer for credit, may face additional challenges compared to their more affluent peers (Eby, 1998; Niemi, Hepburn, & Chapman, 2000). Yet, at the same time, institutions and governments mandate that students volunteer in order to gain real world experience under the assumed notion of “global citizenship” (Sagan, 2015). While critical dialogue on volunteerism is well acknowledged, pressure for service learning opportunities continues unabated. This presents a paradox in that the ethical shortcomings are well acknowledged, but the process of traveling to a community—near or abroad—putting in volunteer hours, and returning to comfortable conditions is not really questioned (Gallini & Moley, 2003). What is more, host communities are rarely involved in this conversation. As a result, the critical dialogue on experiential learning focuses on transforming this narrow approach of self-interested voluntourism to a form of meaningful community outreach. By extension, some programs are even calling for transformative acts, activism and solidarity as part of their outcomes (Brickford & Reynolds, 2002; Cushman, 1999). However, the methodological process of going some place, offering
assistance, recording the experience and returning to reflect is not widely challenged (Rennick & Desjardins, 2013a). Those who do critically challenge this process tend to reject the idea of experiential learning as being able to overcome ethical challenges (Jefferess, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2014). As a result, educators who acknowledge the ethical shortcomings, “the limited community impact of service learning” according to Butin (2014), and who want to move the experience from narrow philanthropy to transformative development action, may be limited by not challenging the methodological process itself.

The increasing popularity of approaching experiential learning through activism, action, advocacy and transformative acts clearly shows a disconnect with the self-serving service models. However, solidarity, activism and action are deeply political processes that are not always universally celebrated. In fact, by definition, the process of engaging in activism implies that someone, or something, is a target for change. Likely, the target will be in opposition to the proponents, and could take exception with the class, the faculty and even the institution (Ferguson, 1990). Trepidation of becoming too political is, as Vrasti (2012) states, “a nagging feeling that academics have lost the ability to contribute to real life struggles, and that the university is no longer the birth place of radical thought and action.” Activism is a democratic process of popular power (Shaw, 2001). It has the ability to topple governments, radically change conditions and break down social inequities. In this sense activism is not something to be taken lightly, as popular power through activism can, and often does, intimidate authorities (Zinn, 2007). To encourage experiential learning through activism is to suggest that students and professors will take political sides and pursue an end goal. Depending on the target, such actions could bring about serious consequences. What is more, no matter what political action students and professors take on, there will be others outside of the academy who are more intimately tied to the issue and whose lives are bound by it, sometimes even threatened by it. All pedagogies are political in some way, regardless of whether or not there is an intentional activist component to it. This idea reinforces the argument that the classroom is in itself an inherently political space, regardless of the pedagogy design (Hooks, 2003; Mohanty, 2003).

In sum, for a university program to seriously engage in activism implies a commitment to deep connectivity and solidarity to a community impacted by an issue. It is not to say that it is impossible, as Langdon and Agyeyomah (2014) claim, but that activist pedagogy should be a product of solidarity, not a marketing design by university administrators. This sort of connection may not be achieved through the above-mentioned pedagogical methodology that experiential learning has been traditionally accustomed to.

Perhaps then, the problem with making the world your classroom, is not so much about how students should pursue travel, volunteering, recording and reflection in an ethical manner, but instead how students should really connect with communities who are embroiled in political struggle. What if the university classroom can serve less as pre-departure travel assistance, and more as a laboratory for ethics, communications skills and
solidarity? Nolan and Featherstone (2015) argue for the importance of recognizing the different means by which actors seek to contest politics. I suggest that it is possible to engage students as political actors with communities through activism, to connect them to communities—even those on the other side of the world—and to pursue transformative change within those communities by travelling only as far as the classroom itself.

**Go Where You Cannot Go**

One way to work beyond the consumer-centered ethics of voluntourism is to ask whether or not it is possible to have a connection to places that are ill advised to travel to, or impossible to volunteer in. In this way the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) serves an important function for this discussion. The country is best referred to as a “total control zone,” famous for human rights abuses, structured misery and violations of each and every clause of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Harden, 2012; Narayan, 2015). North Korea governance is authoritarian, erratic and feudal by design (Lankov, 2014; Kim, 2016). The Kim Regime divides its citizens through the so-called “Songbun” system, a class hierarchy that distinguishes between “loyal, wavering and hostile” members of society, with some 54 sub categories of social ranking (Collins, 2012). A diplomat would be considered loyal, a truck driver for the military in rural areas could be classified as wavering and a peasant farmer near the border of China would be deemed hostile (Hunter, 1999). The some 200,000 prisoners in political labour camps are considered by the regime to be “human garbage” (Harden, 2012).

As much as the country faces crushing poverty, reoccurring famine, human rights abuses, in addition to a wide range of social calamities, it is shockingly ignored by International Development Studies. However, these issues are discussed in Political Science and Security Studies literature (Saaty & Vargas, 2013). The lack of traditional aid into the country coupled with the Orwellian state surveillance and control that goes along with visiting the country partially explain why International Development Scholars have all but ignored North Korea. Occasionally foreign delegations, for religious or sport purposes, visit North Korea, and even then, these groups are strictly limited in who they can engage with and where. Academic exchanges with foreign scholars also occur to some degree. Groups like the Choson Exchange (2016) offer person-to-person academic visits to Pyongyang, where they connect foreign academics to the regime’s elite for seminars in business skills development. However, no “experiential learning” with foreign students can occur in North Korea. Media is occasionally allowed into the country with strict guidelines as to whom they may interact with, but person-to-person contact is limited and strictly observed.

Taken together, North Korea is a no-go zone for experiential leaning for three reasons. First, North Korea is widely viewed by scholars as a security concern rather than as a development issue, which leaves little scholarly foundation to develop any sort of program. Second, visitors to North Korea are carefully screened, monitored and observed, which limits any real ability for person-to-person interaction that is not directly influenced by the
regime. Third, no volountourism exists within the country, so travel and service learning is not an option.

Tourists do travel to North Korea, often paying over €4,000 for a holiday ranging from a week to ten days (Yang, Han, & Ren, 2014). These tours are famous for their careful scripting, manicured presentations, total surveillance and a lack of engagement with locals. Every tourist is assigned a guide to give a well-documented script about the history, culture and politics of the country. If tourists deviate from the set rules or defame the leader they put themselves at risk, along with their handler. Recently, North Korea has made a habit of detaining foreign tourists in order to gain diplomatic parleys with the governments of their home countries (The Associated Press, 2016). At the time of writing this article, there are 14 foreigners known to be in North Korean Prisons.

The very idea of ever engaging North Korea through experiential volountourism is impossible. The risk to one’s own safety, and the safety of their handlers is too high and the landscape is an Orwellian veil (Myers, 2011). By not being able to engage with North Korea in this way, researchers and students struggle to build understanding of the country, its governance and its society. For the most part, scholars are left to rely on defector testimony of the accounts of their own lives in North Korea (Baek, 2016). Because North Korea is difficult to access, because information can be skewed and because it is underexplored in development studies, does it mean that it, and the human rights violations occurring within it, should be ignored? How can students in a country like Canada even engage in this tremendously opaque and complicated place?

“Development and Activism,” an undergraduate course at Dalhousie University, attempted to connect students to North Korea studies through various acts of solidarity with North Korean refugees. Over the semester, students built relations with well-known defectors, received human rights organizations for forums and roundtables and worked with a human rights NGO to assist in the rescue of a person out of North Korea. The class did not employ the experiential learning model of traveling, volunteering, recording and reflecting, because such a model would be both problematic to pursue and impossible to execute given the subject matter. Instead the class followed a model along these lines: study, organize, coordinate and engage. What is more, the class sought advice from refugees, communities and activists involved in the North Korean human rights crisis. In particular, the class worked with Liberty in North Korea (LINK), a group that facilitates rescues and works to promote education of the human rights calamities in North Korea.

In 2015, LINK agreed to accept students in the Camp 14 Project as members of a rescue team—a group organizing to support the rescue of a refugee out of North Korea. Working with an NGO itself did not set this class apart from other experiential pedagogies, but it was how the students approached the topic through a path of curiosity and humility as non-experts. The lack of scholarly research on North Korea enables this, but so too does structuring the experience humbly so that students are positioned as allies to those in need, rather than as experts on the issue. Much of the broader critique against volountourism
abroad is that students are empowered to believe that they are already experts and that their personal knowledge, not just their actions, is what will lead to betterment. The Camp 14 Project enabled students to collaborate and work together for a cause without assuming the role of experts and leaders on the issue.

For the students, this experience involved fundraising, awareness building, political lobbying and further studying of the human rights violations taking place in North Korea. With the funds raised and the support to LINK, the efforts translated into bribing border guards, transporting a refugee through China and across the border of two more countries and into Bangkok. Funds were sent to LINK, a registered charity, and LINK organized all details of the rescue. The students did not coordinate the escape; they were only fundraisers and advocates. Some colleagues took exception with the class project saying that it was unethical to fake documents, cross borders illegally and to transport North Korean refugees through China. These comments came at the same time that Canadian universities showed outpouring of support for Syrian refugees, many of whom cross borders illegally with or without documentation, and require safe transport through hostile territory. It seemed at odds that moral support would not be forthcoming in aiding North Korean refugees. Perhaps this was due to support for Syrian refugees coming from top-level university administration, while assisting a North Korean refugee was viewed as a “for-credit” assignment. Students in the Camp 14 Project were not travelling or volunteering. They were fundraising and organizing.

In addition to raising funds for LINK, mostly through selling samosas on campus, a quick and affordable snack that could be easily sold between classes, students also organized a protest aimed at the “Halifax Security Forum”, a meeting of world leaders and military officials, with the message that human rights in North Korea should be a top priority for foreign policy agendas. Students were evaluated on their ability to critically reflect on their actions and to associate their particular activities with broader concepts in the literature. This is to say that the quality of the action was not up for evaluation. Rather, the entire evaluation process focused on each student’s ability to critically reflect on the experience.

But with this different approach to experiential learning, what are the new ethical concerns that arise? Is it appropriate to sell street food to fund an NGO based in California that is helping people pass through China? Are there other organizations that would benefit from the funds more? Should students be involved with an issue that is this politically complex? And what are the real connections that students make to the issue and to those involved with it? How will students, and the course, navigate the ever-demanding task of representing the narratives of those involved in the issue?

From Voluntourism to Activism?

One of the main differences of the Camp 14 Project with other experiential learning classes is that the class engages in activism as organized actions to make political demands
Going where nobody should go

In particular, the Camp 14 Project asked that international leaders pay greater attention to the human rights crisis in North Korea (Semansky, 2016), and that countries should seek out possibilities to help with refugee resettlement (Zilio, 2016). The students’ message to the Halifax Security Forum was simply that if governments wanted to discuss security, then human security should also be on the agenda. In a previous year, students in the class mailed copies of the book *Escape from Camp 14* to 70 members of the Canadian Parliament, both Senators and Members of Parliament. Letter writing campaigns to government officials also followed with the demand that the Canadian government could do more to assist in the North Korean refugee crisis either by providing immigration assistance or by opening refugee spaces for defectors coming to Canada.

One media columnist argued that the letter writing, protesting and organizing involved in this class did not require a lot of thought, skill or need for deep reflection (Urback, 2014). As Shaw (2001) states, successful tactical activists dedicate enormous effort to coordinating strategies and learning from the history of activists before them. This raises questions about what activism is, and what role it has on campus (Huish, 2013). It also challenges the normative process of experiential learning from spending time in service to spending time coordinating and organizing. Universities have a long history of activism, and in many cases student-led activism has the ability to make huge transformations (Zinn, 2007; Huish, 2013). Student-led movements on campuses have toppled governments around the world, from India, to Cuba, to Singapore, to Egypt. It is a powerful social force that can lead to unexpected outcomes. To some, tapping into this knowledge and power is very intimidating. A critical narrative repeatedly heard against campus activism is that as long as politically sensitive topics are discussed in a classroom setting there is no major objection by university administration or the public. But once the message and the learning space goes from the classroom to the streets, regardless of the subject matter, there is almost always some level of backlash, from colleagues, critics, other students or the university administration.

Since its inception, Development and Activism received a great deal of critical response in national newspapers and television (Huish, 2013). In the *National Post*, a Toronto-based daily newspaper, readers provided feedback in the comments section to an article profiling the course (Boesveld, 2014). Readers wrote, “How dumb must someone be to need to learn how to protest”? Another reader wrote, “Whoever approved this course should be fired immediately”. In the *Globe and Mail*, another Toronto-based newspaper, readers’ comments included, “I would not hire a student who took this course” and “this is going to end very, very badly” (Bradshaw, 2010). Interestingly enough, most of the critiques focused on the idea of students organizing in the street, rather than the topic itself. In fact, SUN NEWS, a former organ of sensationalist Canadian conservative media, reported, “The students are protesting human rights abuses in North Korea, which is a good topic, but maybe they’ll start protesting on topics about abortion or Israel?” (SUN NEWS, 2015).
The message here is that tactful activism requires knowledge, skills, coordination and reflection. A demand is growing in civil society for students who have these skills, who understand the constitutionality of protest and who have experience in direct engagement. As much as university classrooms can serve as ideal spaces to facilitate the learning of activist skills and tactics, some may claim that the classroom is about the pursuit of knowledge, and not a space to engage power. Such reaction is inherent to protest and activism, and it too serves as a learning opportunity for students to develop skills in knowing how to handle adverse reactions to their actions.

Taken together, this pedagogy can result in students experiencing activism as a process of challenges and moral dilemmas more than as an experience that brings clear answers and solutions to social problems. This goes against many university marketing campaigns that emphasize leaders of tomorrow, and the ability for volunteer experience to solve all problems, and complements Vrasti (2013), Heron (2000), and Mostafenezhad’s (2013) work that experiential learning is a far more complex problem than is often marketed. It also challenges the sometimes-used higher education pitch that an individual who cares a great deal can change the world. Activist pedagogies illuminate how change comes through laborious effort and tedious tasks that require dealing with difficult group dynamics of disorganization, conflict, difference of opinions and staunch opposition (Shaw, 2001). Moreover, it can afford students the opportunity to engage on issues in real time and to forge genuine connections with people impacted by the issue. For students in the Camp 14 Project, a well-known North Korean defector named Shin Donghyuk visited the university three times to tell his story of his time in a North Korean labour camp (Semansky, 2014). Students nominated him for an honorary degree, and after controversy broke out about the earnestness of his life story, students worked to give him a public platform to tell his story (Naegelen, 2015). As much as this process afforded students the opportunity to experience advocacy and solidarity, university programs, as Butin (2006) suggests have “institutional limits to experiential learning” and tend to not embrace activist pedagogy.

**Let’s Risk It All**

University administrators are risk-adverse. Any indication that a university could be liable for student or faculty actions is often met with a stern response that the actions are inappropriate for research or teaching (Haggerty, 2004; Owen, 2004; Stoecker, 2008; Van den Hoonoord, 2002). To the chagrin of many university administrators, activism is about taking risks in often untested waters by “unlearning” oppressive normative behaviours in society (Hooks, 2003). To be committed to social justice and change is to embrace risk in many forms (Shaw, 2001). There is risk of defeat, and also the greater risk of success—meaning that succeeding demands one to take responsibility for the outcomes. Being committed to change also means practicing solidarity with communities who take well-entrenched political stances (Langdon & Agyeomah, 2014). Universities are accustomed to risk analysis based not only on harm reduction but to deflect litigation. For activists set
on changing policy and governance, real-time battles of power will occur that no ethics review board would be able to comfortably navigate, or able to anticipate all of the potential liabilities (Owen, 2004; Stoecker, 2008). Ethics boards tend to review research in order to ensure that subject, research and institution are free of harm and risk (Palys & Lowman, 2010). For pedagogy, ethics review can be handled at department or faculty levels, sometimes with meticulous enthusiasm (Huish, 2012).

If classes are to form experiential learning through genuine acts of solidarity, faculty have a narrow window to navigate in order to ensure the authenticity of the action is being informed by and connected to activist partners, but also that risk and harm do not come to those involved. It also means that faculty need to be mindful of the almost certain fact that, regardless of the topic, opponents will challenge the value of the course because it is taking a message into a political space. On a similar line, faculty members need to use caution in becoming too close to an issue, so that their own politics do not necessarily transcend the experiential learning process. Moral stances can quickly escalate into entrenched positions that shape the learning process.

For the Camp 14 Project, students conducted the background research on the subject, coordinated the tactics of protest, crafted their own speeches, music, photography and social media impact. Students coordinated the relationship with LINK for fundraising and organized media engagement. Since the project guidelines insisted that only legal forms of protest would be used, and this included coordinating with police, no risks would occur from direct action. LINK and their partners handled the rescue of a North Korean refugee, and students were not directly responsible for the coordination of the logistics. In sum, Camp 14 Project offered an experiential learning process that combined advocacy with solidarity without putting students or their partners at any “additional risk” that would satisfy university risk management boards. But also, the project did not risk breaking the bonds of solidarity or exploit vulnerable communities to the advantage of a learning environment for the students. For the refugee who fled North Korea, it is likely that she would have attempted the journey regardless of available support, or, less likely, she would remain in the North and live at risk of persecution. The journey out of North Korea involves tremendous risk, but for students to participate in a process of offering assistance, at a time when the international community largely ignores the issue, is an expression of solidarity and a means of helping to mitigate such risk.

As difficult as it is to coordinate learning opportunities such as this, there is a worrisome concern that many faculty will not pursue innovative curriculum along these lines out of fear of reprisal from their university administrations. At several conferences, many colleagues mentioned that they would be too worried to pursue activist pedagogy out of fear of reprimand. Academics tend to have a wide berth to engage in research, but often more when it comes to pedagogy. Self-regulation is the main element of quality control for higher education, or in team teaching environments, peer-pressure can serve a role as well. Self-regulation can also come with self-censorship out fear of reprimand, or out of fear of losing out of the increasingly rare, and ever-more insecure, academic jobs. While a great
deal of poor teaching goes undisciplined, a few stories of classroom tragedies, either from accident or intention, do make national headlines and fan a fear that the authorities are closely watching (Boesveld, 2012). However, self-inflicted fear of being called into the Dean’s Office, or worse, to stand before a committee or Senate hearing to justify your actions can stifle innovation, and actually hold back faculty members from discussing the sort of ethics and risk that universities are prepared to take when it comes to activism, solidarity or even ideas of global citizenship. If universities are unable to openly discuss and pursue activist pedagogies as normative rather than exceptional, then the notion of activism will remain as a timid impression of it on campus, rather than as a genuine commitment to it. By not engaging in dialogue about the intersection of experiential learning and activism would be an opportunity lost for universities to actually having deeper roles in progressive transformations.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper has demonstrated that amid the serious ethical shortcomings of experiential learning, both locally and globally, activist pedagogies may be an important approach to engaging students to address pressing social issues through acts of solidarity. The example of the Camp 14 Project does not serve as a model methodology. Rather, it was a particular opportunity taken to attempt political advocacy and action on an issue that is under-explored by many in the academy. The value of the Camp 14 Project is that it demonstrates that students do not need to travel and serve in order to feel engaged to an issue. Nor do they need to physically experience a place to feel connected. By changing the value of service within the classroom experience to values of solidarity it connects students to a political sphere with transformative impacts.

The course has received heated feedback from media, from faculty members and from some students. These reactions have less to do with the topic, the evaluation models or even the design of the course, and more to do with the process of taking university subject matter into a political and public space. When educators take experiential learning into a political space, it will invite reaction and retaliation. This makes activist pedagogy painfully difficult to standardize or to pass through an ethics review process. Indeed, perhaps neither should happen. Instead, it may be far more important for faculty to not self-censor if they have an innovative idea, or if they have experience on an issue that they feel passionate about to design a learning program that connects students to the issue.

Activism has always been a part of university campuses — at least dating as far back as The Reformation. Rarely though has the experience been awarded in-class credit. How credit can be awarded, and how lessons can be planned are questions that should not necessarily be answered through standardization. Rather than continuing to remodel experiential learning by burning down and rebuilding the tried pattern of travel, volunteerism and reflection, is it possible to innovate pedagogy in political spaces to the benefit of both students and communities? In an era of seemingly constant protest, there are thousands of marginalized communities, locally and globally, fighting structures of
powers for better rights. To make a difference, students do not need to engage in experiential learning that values “saving” as much as “engaging” in learning processes that allow for “doing.” Learning and engagement as “doing” can be about building confidence in processes of activism from rallies, to mail campaigns to formal petitions of government against unjust laws or practice or moral behaviour. Such actions are often considered exceptional, rather than normative. Higher learning has an important opportunity to make such engagement normative. Universities can serve an important role through solidarity with such communities, providing that faculty members have the courage to go beyond making the world a classroom to actually making change from the classroom itself.
References


Palys, T. & Lowman, J. (2010). Going boldly where no one has gone before? How confidentiality risk aversion is killing research on sensitive topics. Journal of Academic Ethics, 8(4), 265-284.


Author Biography

Robert Huish is an Associate Professor in International Development Studies at Dalhousie University. His research covers a wide range of topics related to social justice, health care, human rights and activism. Dr. Huish has published several articles on North Korea's human rights abuses and security threats. He has also published several articles and paper about the value of experiential learning and the crucial place of activist pedagogy on campus. In 2012 he was named one of Canada’s most innovative educators in the Globe and Mail’s “Our Time to Lead” series. Dr. Huish continues to pursue research on North Korea, and offers innovative experiential learning classes that go beyond service learning.