

Learning and Practicing International Development: The Dalhousie Collaborative Project in Cuba

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Experiential learning is one of the most powerful ways for students to achieve a deep and lasting understanding of an area of study. Through case studies, field work, internships, laboratories, and other situations, students learn first hand how to apply theoretical concepts studied in the classroom. John Kirk of the Department of Spanish describes one such learning experience available to students in the International Development Studies Programme. In 2000, this programme earned an honourable mention for the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education's national Alan Blizzard Award for collaborative projects that improve student learning.

The Dalhousie Collaborative Project in Cuba employs the talents of two sets of gifted academics, one in Cuba and the other in Canada, and employs Cuban reality as the laboratory for an intensive course examining the reality of a developing nation. Its objectives are to provide Canadian students with a hands-on experiential education as they observe and participate in the Cuban development model. The partners are the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (The Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, or FLASCO-Cuba) at the University of Havana and the International Development Studies Programme at Dalhousie University.

The course is designed to help Canadian International Development Studies (IDS) students understand the complexities of a developing society, and to do so in a way that combines traditional academic research and practical work experience. It has been carefully prepared by Cuban academics in conjunction with Canadian colleagues at Dalhousie. Following two years of language

training and a series of workshops to prepare them for Cuban reality, the participants in this programme spend three to four months in Cuba. There they undergo two weeks of intensive Spanish to prepare them for the intricacies of Cuban Spanish, approximately a month of coursework at the University of Havana focusing on the Cuban development model, a month of field research outside Havana supervised by FLASCO-Cuba faculty, and then a month back in Havana for further coursework and research on a major final research paper. All of this does not occur in a vacuum, of course, since the students are fully immersed in the reality of Cuban society complete with its ebullience, contradictions, and excitement. The students live with Cuban families and so deal with the daily challenges facing all Cuban citizens.

Cuban and Canadian academics follow the progress of the students closely, and there are several occasions for debriefing and for providing input from faculty and students alike. Cuban and Canadian

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academics also get together at least twice a year to analyse the programme, evaluate suggested changes, and discuss the students' progress. This is the fourth year of the programme, and it is enormously successful both in terms of raising students' awareness about the complexities of the development process and in fostering personal growth. It is difficult for students not to be moved by their experience, and this personal evolution clearly runs in tandem with the development of significant academic growth. Both Cuban and Canadian academics are delighted with this programme and see it as a model for collaborative education.

Context of student learning

Since the objective of this programme is for IDS students to understand the nature of the Cuban development model, the course of studies has been designed specifically to provide the students with related work experience. The resultant experiential learning offers exceptional, and sometimes unusual, insights into what the development process is all about.

same time a number of liberal economic reforms have been made in the last eight years: inviting foreign investment (in joint ventures), legalizing the US dollar, and authorizing self-employment in certain sectors. And finally, Cuba boasts the best social indices in the developing world. This is a complex, and often contradictory, blend for International Development students to understand at the best of times. But living in an environment that is, in essence, a superb social sciences laboratory is an extraordinary opportunity to question models and theses learned in a classroom setting and to experience collaborative learning like never before.

Impact on student learning

In many ways the best measure of the programme's success is the students themselves. IDS faculty and staff meet with them before they go to Havana, attempt to keep in contact with them via email while they are away, and then debrief them and their Cuban professors in Havana at the conclusion of the programme. Meetings are held with the students in Havana at the end of the course and then one month later after their return to Halifax, both to evaluate their learning experience and to assist them with culture shock as they return to the opulence of Canada. Experience has shown that the students are generally balanced and fair in their evaluations of the programme and of their own input. And finally, there is the analysis of faculty members of the IDS programme at Dalhousie, with a wealth of experience in a number of areas. Most of the students who participate in the Cuba programme also take courses on Latin America that are taught in the Spanish Department, so faculty get another opportunity to evaluate students' progress. All students also need a minimum of two years of Spanish at the University level.

Employment opportunities

It is also worth noting that the vast majority of students who have undertaken the Cuba programme consider this



A group of students in front of the University of Havana.

So how, precisely, do the students attain learning? Living in Havana the first seven weeks gives them the opportunity to observe the macrocosm of the Cuban development model. This is useful, particularly since the Cuban approach is definitely *sui generis*. Cuba is a one-party state with the entire political system under state control. At the

- experience a major factor in their being
- hired to work for non-governmental
- organizations (NGOs) around the world.
- Employers believe that students, having
- done well in a difficult field placement, can
- adjust to different cultural realities. One



One of the group's many field trips.

student who was offered a CIDA internship in Trinidad notes that "the fact that I had spent time in a developing nation studying development issues was brought up by the interviewer." Another student states that:

- *I am currently working for the Habitat International Coalition in South Africa. I can honestly say my employers needed to know that I could 'deal' with living in another culture and be sensitive to development issues. Scholastic experience cannot prove that. For them my experience in Cuba did.*

Scholarship

- Concerning the overall scholarly merit of the Cuba programme, we are delighted that it has attracted bright students from Canada, and occasionally from the United States, precisely because of its reputation.
- This is a first-rate interdisciplinary course, allowing students to penetrate the reality of a vastly different culture and to really appreciate what makes it tick. It encourages them to think, comparing academic analysis with the reality that they have not only studied close-up, but have also lived.
- Finally, this has been done in a hands-on fashion, providing them with a vitally important dimension of appreciation of what "development" is all about.

Active Learning

- Learning is clearly an ongoing process, one that requires repetition and active involvement to master new skills. The daily challenges faced by the students cause them to question many things they had previously accepted as fact. One student emphasized the resultant opportunity:

To study and live in a situation where one has to communicate in a different language, learn how to function, work and study in a different political, economic and social system was incredibly valuable for my education, in not only essential development issues, but also in my personal growth as a human being.

Several of the participants over the years have indicated that their programme in Cuba changed significantly the way in which they approach their studies in development. Typical is this view:

It was a great experience to learn about issues that are not covered in IDS core classes...It gave me so much apart from academic education...Seeing for oneself the acute or broad problems that face people in less developed countries is so important in understanding the seriousness and complexity of many different issues.

Broader impact and future developments

We all like to think that our courses offer a significant learning experience and are special in some way. Rarely, however, can we match the significance of such a concentrated life experience as the IDS students have gone through in Cuba. Many can finally appreciate the challenges and contradictions of international development as well as the difficulty of "doing development" without having lived in the field. But the Cuban programme goes beyond that; we have witnessed from debriefing each of the four groups that Dalhousie has sent to Cuba that it leaves a far greater mark. Two participants from the 1998 group noted:

Both of us agree it was one of the most rewarding academic experiences of our lives.

This programme deliberately paints with broad strokes. We intentionally steer away from over-specialization. In part this is because of the nature of the Spanish Department at Dalhousie, which teaches a variety of courses (from Latin American cinema to contemporary Mexico and Central America) not usually associated

with a “language department”. Culturally it is proactive, sending students to live in Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Spain, and Cuba. Likewise, the IDS programme offers a wide variety of courses and is able to draw on Dalhousie’s academic expertise in a whole host of disciplines from political science to anthropology, economics to medicine. The most important factor, however, is the nature of FLASCO-Cuba, a real gem of interdisciplinary social sciences teaching and research.

This is a unique programme offering students the opportunity to participate in an exceptional experiential learning model. The development of this teaching and learning model is critically dependent on an extraordinary academic collaboration at the institutional and inter-institutional level. It could well be entitled “International Development: from Theory to Practice,” because that is precisely the challenge participants face. The fact that they speak the language, live within the Cuban community, and work alongside their research subjects all adds very much to the hands-on experience. But the last word should be left to the students:



In 1999, IDS students participated in a local parade.

Every day was a learning experience, from the professors in our classes to the Cubans out on the streets, through every interaction my mind expanded. The learning process extended far beyond the classroom and into people’s homes and their lives. Every day a new opinion would take shape and my whole thought process would begin to change and evolve...I began examining and questioning information in ways totally new and foreign to me.

This is what learning is really all about.

For more information on the Dalhousie Collaborative project in Cuba, contact Marian MacKinnon, International Development Studies, 494-3814.

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