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Nicholas J. C. Santos

Marquette University, nicholas.santos@marquette.edu

Heather Kohls

Marquette University, heather.kohls@marquette.edu

Jennifer S. Maney

Marquette University

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Experiential Learning in the Jesuit Business School Context: The AGBL Program

Heather Kohls, Nicholas Santos, S.J. and Jennifer Maney¹

Abstract

In an attempt to engage Jesuit business school students in transformational learning, Marquette University offers the Applied Global Business Learning (AGBL) Program. This program embodies the Ignatian pedagogy paradigm of helping students gain an understanding of a business need in a different part of the world, engages them in action, and has them reflect on and evaluate the experience as it relates to how they take the experience to change the world. This paper discusses the program's relation to the Jesuit tradition, the history of the program including where students go and what they do, the impact on student learning, and its contribution to the ways in which Jesuit institutions promote and support students as change agents upon graduation.

Keywords: Service Learning, Ignatian Pedagogy, Adult Learning Theory, Jesuit business education.

The slums really transformed almost every perception I had about poverty. Meeting the people who lived in these areas and hearing their stories and optimism was truly inspirational. It became apparent just by listening to some of the women's stories and asking them about their future, they were reassured that others care about their future and their success. If there is one lesson I will take back to my community and remember (it) is that hope is contagious and can be a difference no matter where you are in the world.
Applied Global Business Learning student

¹Heather Kohls is Associate Professor of Practice of Economics at Marquette University, Nicky Santos, S.J. is Associate Professor of Marketing and Rector of the Jesuit Community at Creighton University, Jennifer Maney is the Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Marquette University.

Introduction

According to Mezirow's (1991) adult learning theory, learners need to experience what are called 'disorientation dilemmas' to challenge their own thinking. It is only then that students can critically reflect on whether their underlying assumptions about the world are accurate. The late Jesuit, Dean Brackley (1999), points out that today's faith-based universities need to reach beyond an excellent 'liberal' education and prepare their students for the real world or what he calls "la realidad mundial." This implies that teaching in our Jesuit universities needs to go beyond the classroom and beyond the specific content of various fields of study to engage our students with real world realities. Brackley (1999, p.5) poignantly points out that "we want them [our students] to understand the world's suffering and the causes of that suffering, as well as possible solutions. But, in addition, we want them to be morally prepared to change the world when they leave the university." In a challenging address to the delegates of the World Meeting of Universities entrusted to the Society of Jesus, Fr. Arturo Sosa, the Superior General of the Jesuits calls upon those involved with Jesuit universities to consider the university as a project of social transformation in order to generate a full life. As Fr. Sosa (2018, p.2) notes, "when the university is conceived as [a] *project of social transformation*, it moves towards the margins of human history, where it finds those who are discarded by the dominant structures and powers."

Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, SJ, the former superior general of the Society of Jesus, at the first international gathering of Presidents of Jesuit Universities in Mexico City posed an important question: "How many of those who leave our institutions do so with both professional competence and the experience of having, in some way during their time with us, a depth of engagement with reality that transforms them at their deepest core?" (Nicolas, 2010, p. 6). Fr. Nicolas challenged those present to reinvent the university so as "to help shape a more humane, just, faith-filled, sustainable world." Laczniak and Santos (2017) note that Fr. Nicolas' comments as well as Pope Francis' (2013) urging of an ethical approach to economics and finance implies that "if Jesuit business education is to be a force for global social justice, its programs of business education must have unique and engaging elements that will permanently alter the future behavior of Jesuit school graduates."

In this paper we present one such program at Marquette University, a Jesuit university located in the city of Milwaukee in the United States. The program titled "Applied Global Business Learning" (AGBL) has the potential to provide both a disorientating dilemma leading to real learning to which Mezirow

(1991) refers and an opportunity to offer solutions to the world's problems, as Brackley (1999) poses. The program, both its classroom content and the travel experience, encourages students to apply the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm of experience-reflection-action to learn and meaningfully reflect on their experience. Further, it responds to Fr. Sosa's challenge of viewing the university as a project of social transformation, taking our faculty and students to the margins of society, working with those discarded by the dominant structures and powers. Additionally, along the lines of Fr. Nicolas' challenge, it provides an opportunity for the students to engage with the gritty realities of this world and to transform them at their deepest core (cf. Tellis 2011). In this paper, we first begin by elaborating and providing some background on the AGBL program at Marquette University, highlighting its connection to the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm. We then use some student comments to indicate the impact of the program on the students' learning and development. We end with identifying some challenges and avenues for further research.

Program History

The Applied Global Business Learning (AGBL) is primarily an undergraduate¹ academic program under the Center for Applied Economic Studies at Marquette University (MU) founded in 2008. Its purpose is to connect students, faculty and business leaders with motivated entrepreneurs in the developing world. It intends to foster sustainable business solutions while preserving cultural ideals with the goal of improving the lives of those involved in small businesses or micro-enterprises.

The AGBL program is an opportunity for students of all majors to get hands-on experience with businesses in a developing country and to engage in a unique cultural exchange. Each service-learning trip focuses on a new business endeavor, finding answers, surveying local customers, and seeking out local expertise. AGBL students spend two months preparing for a one- or two-week trip in January or March. The student groups range from 8 to 12 in number and upperclassmen are selected via an interview and application process. (Occasionally sophomores are included mainly with the intent of including them in future trips.) The content of the course is currently based on the textbook *Economic Development* by Marcelo Guigale and led by a member of the economics faculty.

Most projects begin with a simple Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat or SWOT analysis. Familiar to the students, it gives them a meaningful starting point and quickly helps them to identify where they can 'be the

difference' to the entrepreneurs. Incorporating students across a variety of disciplines has proven to be an asset to the student groups. Diversity of the group creates a wider scope of interviewing, leading the group to a deeper understanding of the market inequalities facing the small entrepreneur. It helps them to see the potential power of trade and property rights and the devastation of government corruption and lack of infrastructure. Then they try to help their 'client' find a way to succeed despite all of it.

Consulting projects have varied widely. One project involved helping a community identify ways to ensure food security. The students considered the theories of a sharing economy and discovered that the level of trust required to sustain this process was greater than what existed in their community. Some other examples include the identification of potential new markets for innovative bio-tech products and investigating whether educational grants were most impactful for grade school, middle school or high school age children. In another project, students helped create a business plan for a women-run purse company. The students brainstormed marketing ideas and plans for the group of four women making sewing purses in a remote part of Tasajera Island, El Salvador. The products were sold in San Salvador markets nearly four hours away. Tasajera Island is split between a few small fishing villages where these women lived and a prosperous tourist area. One student asked about selling the goods to tourists in the local area which was not being served. Not only did they pursue this idea, but it also affirmed for this Marquette student that she too, despite what she identified as her feeling sheltered most of her life, had a voice and could make a difference.

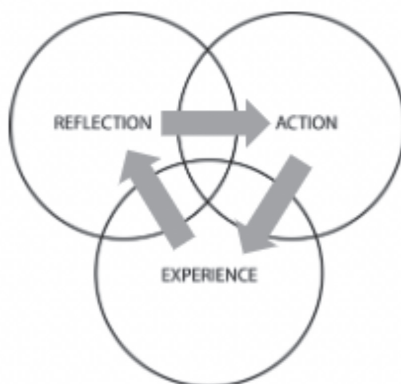
AGBL is a model program for Jesuit institutions because it fosters transformation, promotes justice, and allows students to go beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom to acquire practical knowledge in economic development, entrepreneurship, and business education. "The ultimate aim of Jesuit education is the full growth of the person which leads to action; action, especially, that is suffused with the spirit and presence of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the 'man for others'" (Ignatian Pedagogy, 2014).² It also, as Brackley (1999) suggests, is something that needs to happen far away from the comfort of the classroom. Taking the students to a project rather than the project coming to them, meeting the beneficiaries of their actions, and walking in their footsteps in a developing country becomes the living embodiment of the Ignatian pedagogy paradigm.

The action component of Ignatian Pedagogy requires students to apply their coursework in various disciplines such as marketing and accounting in

a new way; in a market that they need to research and understand, with a client whose needs they need to discern. This experience of action creates an environment of controlled risk taking. Students get to practice their craft with a “client” who will likely put their ideas and strategies into action. They must make their words clear and precise so that their meaning does not get lost in the translation.

This program takes the students out of their comfort zone. They can bring their electronics, but they quickly find comfort in each other and their faculty leaders providing ample opportunities for connection and deep discussion. Jesuit business schools such as the one at Marquette University are more important than ever to prove that business can be successful and compassionate at the same time.³

Figure 1: The Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm



Reflection, a key component of the Ignatian paradigm as shown in Figure 1, is an important emphasis of the course. We begin each day with a short discussion of our hopes for the day and end with a reflection on our experiences. Students are asked to submit a set of ten photos with descriptions highlighting their most meaningful experiences as well as a short paper reflecting on their personal growth. The directions for the final reflection paper (see Appendix 2) focus on the importance of global citizenship, the concept that directs our reflections during the trip. Daily trip reflections are done as a group while final reflection papers are shared between the student and the faculty leader.

In a paper discussing the merit of Ignatian Pedagogy and the study of business, Woods (2013) suggests, that business courses such as economics teach important concepts such as equations, models, and assumptions about a complicated world. But how much time, she asks, do we talk about equity? And even if we do that, are we teaching students to “fully consider the ramifications of the decisions that they will make in the real world:”

After focusing on detailed scenarios and equations, are learners then able to extrapolate the information and see the big picture? It is no longer enough to teach students what to do and how to do it; the responsible instructor should explore the question of why as well (Wood, 2013).

Impact

Part of the Spiritual Exercises tells us that disillusionment means freedom from illusion. Encountering the poor can free us from our illusion of what we may think “the other” is. As Brackley (1999) so eloquently stated in his address in San Salvador, it is when we come out of our comfort zone that we realize that the “marginalized are really at the center of things:

It is we, in Chicago and Paris, who are on the fringe. They [the poor] draw us out of ourselves and usher us into the heart of reality. The poor reveal to us both the horror of evil in the world and the possibility for a more humane way of living together. Can we really consider ourselves educated people unless we allow the poor to break open our world like this?

One AGBL alumnae stated this sentiment in this way:

The women we met stood tall and strong. They were learning to write their names, budget their business, wash their hands; they were learning basic skills that so many people in this world take for granted. Seeing the pride in their eyes and in their smiles was the most inspirational thing I may ever experience. There are things in this world that cannot be unseen. Bangladesh left me with images that I will never want to “unsee.” By opening our eyes, we are better able to understand the issues that we work to improve. I feel lucky to have seen Bangladesh, its people, their pride and their hope for the future. I walk away from Bangladesh humbled and awakened and I hope to forever stay that way. (MU AGBL student)

Another student said it this way:

The poor are people too. They aren't all beggars; they have jobs. They aren't all living in the street; they have small homes... They look like everyone else. The poor are people too. The poor are human just as we are. We are all humans and we all want to be proud of what we do and of ourselves. (MU

AGBL student)

Experiences such as the ones the AGBL offer become life-altering and may prompt students to redirect the focus of their lives. In a 2016 survey of 140 alumni of the program, participants were asked to answer three simple questions. The first question, “Thinking back to your time at Marquette and your experience with AGBL, how impactful would you rate your experience?” on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Good experience, but not life changing) to 5 (AGBL changed the direction I was heading). Of the 30 responses received⁴, 22 answered this question with a 4 or a 5. In answer to the open-ended question of “Did AGBL change your career path in any way?”, 43% of respondents answered Yes. One alumnus provided this explanation: “AGBL didn’t deter me from pursuing careers, but I am more mindful of company values while interviewing with prospective employers. Companies that value justice and have sound business practices globally are something that I took into consideration while applying and ultimately choosing who I wanted to work for. I don’t believe I had this mindset before my trip to El Salvador.” Finally, the respondents were asked, “Can you share any other feedback on how AGBL made a difference to you?” One alumna had this to say: “I had done local volunteer work prior to GBB, but nothing to the extent of this service trip. It really opened my eyes to the vast number of regions still suffering from everyday struggles that we couldn’t imagine facing back home. I felt so connected to and moved by the people we interacted with. That trip has really inspired me to continue taking purposeful service trips throughout my adult life. There are so many different basic needs not being met in communities all around the world - I want to make a difference in working to provide those needs.”

These student reflections and evaluations are a critical component of Ignatian Pedagogy, shedding light on the learner’s growth, intellectually, personally and morally. Often students will reflect on their current career path and how they might be able to serve others in their future. Here’s how one student explained the impact of his trip to Guatemala: the experience created “stronger self-awareness ... (and helped me) to understand the world around me and crawl out of my individualistic lifestyle. It has also helped me realize what I want to do as an occupation in the working world. I have always wanted to help the developing countries of the world, I just never knew how I was going to do it. Being an involved citizen on this trip helped me realize my skills and my potential of being a more productive person. The realization came to be that I wanted to be a policy maker when we were talking to the government official of education and talking about the different policies of Guatemala. Not

only did being an involved citizen on this trip change me into a better and more knowledgeable person, but it helped me decide my career path as well.”

Challenges

Over time it has become apparent that one of the most important conditions for a successful experience is team cohesion, including individual attitudes. When the trips began, any student who applied was accepted. It was quickly observed that some students were not yet prepared to for the opportunity and open to letting it change them. Although identifying those students still poses a challenge, it has become less and less of an obstacle as we have improved our selection process. Currently students who make an initial application are brought in for an interview. The interview begins with a short discussion of past trips incorporating the reality of humble living conditions and the likelihood of crossing paths with six or eight legged creatures. This also provides a first chance for students to realize this is not an average trip. The main reason for all this effort is that our success is mostly about the “group.” Solid GPAs, faculty recommendations, or impressive resumes do not substitute for attitude. When the students are interviewed, there are a few formal questions beyond the observation of their personality and their ability to work well with the rest of the group (see the interview rubric in Appendix 1). It seems that as long as the additional students selected match or fit in with that group dynamic, they will step up to the challenge. There have been a few exceptions, but overall seeking to put that group personality together over trying to diversify majors and attitudes has proven the most reliable strategy. It is evidence that group dynamics can inspire students to try their hardest.

Furthermore, not advertising the program explicitly but rather relying on word of mouth both from student to student and faculty to student has been more successful. Although the program is mentioned in some large freshman classes, only juniors and seniors are generally invited on the trips. As a result, students who were so moved by the idea are the ones who reach out two years later. Ideally, we would try to get every student in the university involved in our program, but in practice that is not realistic. Students looking to sightsee or have a lot of free time are better served elsewhere. Students who want to get their hands dirty and be invested in the experience will find AGBL a strong fit. It is notable that three AGBL alumni have gone on to the Peace Corps.

Questions about the program often focus on how to identify the projects. As Jesuit institutions we are blessed with a variety of contacts. There does not seem to be a recipe that makes for the perfect project. There is so much

need for basic business knowledge in just about every type of venture from non-profits, to hospitals, to micro enterprises. Finding a group who is willing to learn and ready to change is the key.

One of the most important and most difficult components is finding the right housing. Safe water, meeting spaces, and meals used to be the three main considerations. However, since these trips began, it has become apparent that there is more to ‘the right housing’ than that. If the accommodations are too nice, the focus of the project gets lost and students feel guilty when they contrast their lodging with the typical living conditions of our clients. On our trip to Bangladesh, students spent three full days in the slums, visiting, interviewing, and gathering data to support the project. Most students observed that the hardest part of that trip was coming back to our nice hotel at the end of the day. Keeping everything about the program humble has been a big part of who we are. “We don’t do stars” is the unofficial AGBL motto, meaning that the only guarantee made about lodging is that we try to have concrete floors instead of dirt, but hammocks count as a bed. The lack of luxury has helped to make AGBL trips available to students regardless of financial situation. Students pay \$200-\$250 per day all inclusive. Week-long trips range from \$1400 to \$1600 including airfare and transfers. At Marquette, this program has survived because of a stipend of approximately \$10,000 per year from the Center for Applied Economics and a handful of generous and loyal donors.

If this type of international experience is out of the financial reach of students, the AGBL program has been replicated on a local level by the Marquette University College of Business Administration. A course titled “Milwaukee Urban Business Studies,” launched in the Fall of 2018, connects students and faculty with small enterprise clients around the city. Students can learn about Milwaukee urban businesses, the ways in which minority owned businesses contribute to the economic structure of the city, and work collaboratively in identifying and implementing sustainable business solutions to improve the lives of those served in the Marquette community⁵.

Conclusion

Pope Francis invites us to move to the periphery to get our feet muddled with encountering the real lives of the poor. In many respects, the AGBL program has been an attempt to do precisely that. It takes our students and faculty away from the comfort of the classroom to the real-life context that most of the world’s population live in. It challenges our students to go beyond the study of organizations and markets to interact with and appreciate the

people who run businesses and micro-enterprises in this context. It teaches our students and engaged faculty a true solidarity of working together with these entrepreneurs and small business owners to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their initiatives in a spirit of humility.

The AGBL program does take a considerable amount of time and effort and for this reason has been kept small. If the program is to be scaled up to include more students, with more trips to more places, as well as opening it up for students from other Jesuit universities, such scaling will have to be done in such a way that the program does not lose its essence. This is important as many international immersion trips (most universities have one these days) get accused of “poverty tourism” or “poverty voyeurism” or even falling prey to the “savior mentality.” One goal for any university wanting to replicate this program should be to achieve this standard: Be the difference in the entrepreneurs’ and students’ lives.

Another thought to scale these efforts is to partner and collaborate with other organizations and entities both locally and nationally. Partnerships like this could not only help offset costs but build meaningful relationships between college students, community-based organizations with similar missions, and those individuals supported by the work – all in an effort to nurture students who become men and women both for and with others.

In Fr. Arrupe’s address to the “Tenth International Congress of Jesuit Alumni of Europe,” in Valencia, Spain, on July 31, 1973, he argued that “Today our prime educational objective must be to form men-and-women-for-others; men and women who will live not for themselves but for God and his Christ.”⁶ One AGBL alumni/ae said this of his experience:

I was looking for some sort of message to live by going into the trip, so I bought into “Be the Difference”. I spent time thinking about what it means to be the difference and channeling that into action while on the trip.

Looking forward I am excited to represent Marquette University and be the difference in any way possible. We are empowered to take the knowledge we learned in our classes and do some real work. (AGBL student)

Jesuit business education, by and large, has been reserved for a select few, who often find themselves channeled into lucrative careers in the corporate world. If we truly are to respond to Pope Francis’ clarion call to envision a future that includes everyone, then it is perhaps imperative for us to broaden the scope of our educational pedagogy to embrace all those who we impact, especially the poor. The AGBL and the Milwaukee Urban Business Studies programs, though currently limited in scope, offer a model of experiential

business learning and engagement that is more inclusive than most current models of classroom teaching. It is our hope that such an approach will become an integral part of the future of Jesuit business education.

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APPENDIX 1

AGBL Interview Rubric

	Proficient	Competent	Developing
Articulation of Purpose	Articulates well their engagement in service and addresses “why” they do so.	Is seeking something “more” in service – need for processing, experience in Reflection is minimal.	Struggles with language while identifying need to experience more than just the action of service. Willingness to do more.
Charity vs. Service Model	Identifies difference between charity and service, i.e. Service for and service with. Articulates the values of Immersion.	Has done service– yet, wants to extend experience into bigger themes and justice issues. Sees difference Between charity and service.	Using terms that identify basic knowledge of service and articulating a desire for more. Knows service feels good and recognizes relationship in this action of service.
Recognizes Need for program Not just trip	Has addressed personally issues of engaging in global service, Takes initiative to do Service on own, recognizes need To respond to injustice.	Choosing programs that include reflection, looking to become part of the “process” of service, seeking to understanding injustice and not just “do” service.	Does the action of service but has little experience in reflection behind it. Open to reflection, prayer and the communal experience of an immersion trip.

Articulation of purpose:

- 1. What caught your eye about the AGBL program?
- 2. Have you had an experience in service work abroad before? Explain. (Or locally if the answer is no.)
- 3. What made the biggest impression on you during this work?

Charity vs. Service:

- 1. What is the difference between charity and service work?
- 2. Have you traveled abroad before? (May have already answered) Did you get a real feel for the country? Explain.
- 3. Have you experienced true poverty? How did you or would you respond to coming face to face with it?

Need for the program:

- 1. Have you experienced injustice? What is your reaction to it?
- 2. What makes you think that AGBL is the right experience for you?

APPENDIX 2

Instructions for Final Student Reflection:

What does it mean to change the world? Being an involved citizen means you are involved in the everyday practices of decision-making processes that effects your everyday lives. Using your service-learning experiences and course content, please answer the following questions in your blog post related to changing the world:

- How does involved citizenship change the world?
- Who changes the world? Do you have to have money, power, or a position in government in order to change the world?
- What feelings come up when asked 'how can you change the world'?
- How have your experiences of being an involved citizen during your service learning impacted you and who you hope to be someday?
- What has the AGBL experience meant to your understanding of being the difference?

Include 10 photos of your trip along with short memories to share with each one.

After you have published your Reflection blog and pics via the blog hosting service you've selected, **paste the URL of your blog in a post by the date specified in the syllabus.** **Tools**

¹Graduate students are usually allowed to be an assistant leader to a trip, and then have specific tasks assigned to them. This role may also be filled by a student who is going on a trip for a second time.

²Ignatian Pedagogy, An Abridged Version of the document for teaching and learning in a Jesuit school, The Jesuit Institute, London, 2014, p. 1

³Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach, the International Centre for Jesuit Education in Rome, 1993.

⁴This means that we had a response rate of 21% for this survey. Typical rates for an external cold survey range in the 5-15% area, so we were pleased by our response rate.

⁵This program is too new to really discuss impacts; however, we hope to do a future paper exploring this topic.

⁶<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/men-for-others.html>, accessed 6/9/2017.

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