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Anthropological Co-Investigation as Enhancing "Learning the Unintended": Subversion of "Legitimate Knowledge" in Alternative Break Experiential Learning

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Schools support the dominant group's cultural arbitrary as the "legitimate knowledge," sanctioning positively those who have it and thereby reproducing structures of dominance, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued. What happens, then, if students learned something that the teacher did not intend to teach? This paper examines experiential learning that is rife with such "learning the unintended" and suggests a role anthropological investigations play in enhancing it.

This paper analyzes an undergraduate student's experience at an educational farm of an NGO during an alternative spring break trip in 2012. The program aimed at teaching the participants about daily struggles of life in poverty through simulation and humanitarian works through various activities. Afterward, the student reported learning something that the program did not intend: that resource-poor environment makes one have more knowledge and skills than resource-rich environment. It was from his experience of (1) having to learn new knowledge and skills to survive in the simulated Mozambiquan life in poverty and (2) observing his fellow student's having more difficulty in the simulation than him, which he viewed as due to her wealthier upbringing that deprived her of certain skills and resiliency. What he learned subverts the "legitimate knowledge" about resources that the more resource leads to better learning outcome.

This paper also suggests that what we call "anthropological co-investigation" can enhance such learning the unintended. Co-written by an anthropologist and the student under question, this paper models that process. Co-investigation was a process of learning for both authors: the anthropologist acquired insight about what students may get out of experiential learning; and the student gained analytical skills to interpret his learning experience, familiarizing himself with existing theories in due course. We argue anthropological method is a useful tool in enhancing the efficacy of experiential learning with potential for subverting "legitimate knowledge."