

International Internship and Community Engagement during the Pandemic: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered many changes in global communication, raising barriers as well as opportunities for interactivity. While physical travel came to a near halt at the beginning of the pandemic, this has mandated new forms of forging connections. Through the expanding capabilities of video conferencing, the pandemic has catalyzed academic institutional collaboration, not solely among domestic institutions but international universities as well. This presentation will discuss the challenges and opportunities of conducting a cross-cultural internship, collaboration, and community engagement, despite the absence of direct physical interactions. Between January 2021 and May 2021, the authors designed and implemented a cross-cultural online internship program along the lines of sustainable development with team members from the University of Bengkulu's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Center, the agrarian community Bandung Jaya, and an American collegiate institution, Warren Wilson College. Together, these individuals built a website advertising the school of SDGs in Bandung Jaya, highlighting the community's grassroots, women-led organizing around sustainable agriculture and waste management, initiatives taught to outside visitors. Not only did the participants accomplish their immediate goal of expanding an agrarian community's online presence, but they also laid the groundwork for an international network of student and faculty collaboration. With faculty and students from both the University of Bengkulu and Warren Wilson College, the internship allowed for team members to work towards a uniting goal of sustainable development, as well as an opportunity to learn about one another's institutional experiences. The participants set aside time in their weekly meetings to provide an overview of their institution and the general model of higher education in their countries. While halfway across the world from one another, the researchers found common ground in their respective institutions' community engagement emphasis. The online internship program allowed for the collaborators to work alongside a rural community in their efforts to model their sustainability practices, all without leaving one's own home. The partnering agrarian community was able to communicate their goals in the website design regularly, allowing their input to be a directing force in the process and helping to sustain transnational relationships within a postcolonial critical service-learning framework. The participants enhanced the reach of their community engagement network, paving the way for increased global interconnectedness in years to come.

Keywords: COVID-19, cross-cultural internship, institutional collaboration, sustainable development, postcolonial framework

1. Introduction

In March of 2020, American universities and colleges began closing their doors to students, staff, and faculty, shifting to an online model of education in response to the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the United States and worldwide. By January of 2021, nearly 20,000,000 Americans were infected with the Coronavirus, over 900,000 Indonesians, and nearly 85,000,000 worldwide (Number of Cumulative Cases U.S. 2021; Situation Update 2021; Number of Cumulative Cases Worldwide 2021). The

rapid spread of the airborne virus, coupled with emerging variants, disrupted global travel and interconnectivity. Students and educators alike were forced to imagine new methods of international learning and advocacy that did not involve face-to-face contact. As with many disasters, existing structural issues outside of COVID-19 continued and continue to emerge, exacerbated by the global economic collapse in the wake of the large-scale international shutdown. Sustainable agriculture and development remain key issues in postcolonial spaces that necessitate creative and collaborative efforts, especially during a time of global hardship. Joint initiatives between universities and agrarian

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communities pose the traditional challenges and opportunities, yet the COVID-19 pandemic has completely resituated the landscape of community engagement. Amid the mandated shut down in many countries across the world, new technologies emerged to allow individuals to stay connected and engaged. Zoom, the video conferencing service, rose to prominence as a method of communication, allowing anyone with a smart device and an internet connection to access their peers no matter the distance. Increased familiarity and comfort with Zoom, necessitated by the disaster context, even opened avenues for international communication, providing an easier mechanism for connection than previously thought and allowing individuals to reimagine how community engagement can operate in an increasingly virtual world.

The authors of this paper particularly found this to be the case. Seeking to address grassroots, women-led sustainable development and agriculture in Indonesia, two individuals (one undergraduate student and one faculty member) from the American collegiate institution, Warren Wilson College, teamed up with a mixed student and faculty group at the University of Bengkulu's Sustainable Development Goals Center. The SDGs Center is a largely autonomous organization within the university that crafts partnerships with local agrarian communities dedicated to sustainable development. Using a ground-up model, the SDGs Center works to advertise the sustainable work already being done in the partnering communities, centering their lived experiences and knowledge. Working in conjunction, the researchers formed a team with five students and one faculty from the University of Bengkulu to create a website for the village of Bandung Jaya in Sumatra, Indonesia. Bandung Jaya is a women-led community that has made great strides in cultivating a sustainable agriculture production network of goods such as coffee and vegetables, settling decades-old land conflicts with the central government, and instituting an ecological waste management system. Local leaders in Bandung Jaya have been interested in developing a school of SDGs, whereby tourists and visitors may come to the village and learn about sustainable development from the community members themselves. The team members (the American contingent, the UNIB group, and representatives from Bandung Jaya) decided to use their collective linguistic and technological resources to build a joint website, allowing the insights of the Bandung Jaya community to become more accessible worldwide.

1.1. Universalizing Local Values

One of the major goals of the SDGs Center at the University of Bengkulu, in conjunction with their various community partners including the village of Bandung Jaya, is to "universalize local values." Using a postcolonial framework, the intentions of the SDGs center are not to "teach" local communities about sustainable development but to, first and foremost, recognize the existing knowledge of sustainability already built into the social fabric of the partnering communities. Asher and Ramamurthy (2020)

note the importance of problematizing hegemonic structures that view institutional knowledge as the only legitimate voice; rather, true decolonization commands serious consideration of indigenous epistemologies. Along this vein, the SDGs Center wishes to highlight these practices by assisting in developing a more formal infrastructure of advertising, helping build three-day immersive curriculums in which residents teach visitors the various modes of their sustainable practices. Spreading indigenous knowledge of sustainability can take the form of storytelling, lectures, poetry readings, shadow puppet performances, and of course, direct involvement in agricultural production.

Using a variety of mixed media including photos, videos, interviews, and informational text, the researchers set out to compile this information into an accessible, user-friendly, and multi-lingual website. Through a model of critical service learning-community engagement, the American student researcher volunteered 80 hours of work over four months, meeting weekly with the international partners at the SDGs Center and in Bandung Jaya who duly dedicated countless hours to the joint project.

2. Literature Review

There are many benefits to the praxis of community engagement, both to the student and the community at hand. Afzal and Hussain (2020) note that for students of a diverse range of ages, service learning-community engagement (SLCE) has several advantages to the social and civic development of pupils not always found in the traditional classroom model. The authors explain that SLCE can have a positive impact on students' prosocial behavior, understanding of their social skills, sense of self-satisfaction, as well as improvement of peer and recipient relationships. Additionally, community engagement can decrease prejudice and conflict, increasing tolerance for diversity and pluralism. On a more immediate level, service-learning can increase students' sense of social responsibility, awareness of future career paths, understanding of social issues, and improving academic performance. On a more long-term level, Afzal and Hussain demonstrate that those who participate in volunteering early in their lives are more likely to volunteer in the future.

Ellenbogen (2017) confirms these findings, examining the ways that SLCE can enhance the academic experience of students with a broad array of learning types. Extending the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, or knowledge acquired through practice, and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, she outlines a promising framework for the benefits of service-learning. She describes Kolb's four-stage cycle of experiential learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Individuals tend to have predilections for different stages of the cycle, dictating their learning styles. While some traditional universities may see SLCE as inefficient or "watered-down" education, these four stages of experiential learning accommodate and engage a higher number of students by offering diversity in learning styles. Students additionally benefit from proactive (participating

by leading) rather than reactive experiential learning (participating without leading): when students drive the process of community connections and craft their epistemological lens, this further enhances their ability to engage the four-stage cycle.

Scholars have noted the importance of a critical framework within the realm of SLCE. As Hartman (2015) notes, many SLCE programs focus solely on student outcomes rather than the community. He acknowledges the need for mutual benefit in his idea of “fair-trade learning,” which mandates cooperative, cross-cultural participation. In this model, programs must highlight economic equity and sustainability. Programs additionally must examine how money is spent to best suit and support the community. Fair-trade learning must also recognize the agency and expertise of the community members, engaging their insights and lived experiences. Santiago-Ortiz (2019) advocates for “decolonizing” traditional community engagement through “critical service learning.” In this model, there is a strong focus on inequities, power, and oppression, highlighting that ideologies of settler colonialism have long been built into actions in the name of service. Too often, Santiago-Ortiz notes, SLCE programs center the teacher-student relationship and sideline the community, declining to acknowledge community partners as co-educators. STEM-based community engagement often works with groups that are not marginalized, driving a neoliberal agenda of economic growth over social justice. She highlights an asset-based approach to counter these problematic elements of traditional models, which recognize the strengths already present in the community rather than deficit-based thinking (what a community ‘lacks’). Santiago-Ortiz offers a solution of small, cohort-based programs in which students spend extensive time immersed in the community and hearing directly from community members to combat the colonialist mindset of entering a locality and leaving after a short time.

Pasquesi (2020) confirms Santiago-Ortiz’s critiques of traditional SLCE. She notes that community engagement can promote student retention and success: she cites Astin et al. (2000) who found that service-learning participation had a positive effect four years after graduation on competencies, including writing and critical thinking skills, and on engagement outcomes, including commitments to promoting racial understanding and activism. However, programs do not always implement the proper tactics to develop cross-cultural communication skills and analyses of power dynamics. Pasquesi recommends the following practices to improve community engagement outcomes: high quality and sustained service trips; explicit connections between course content and trip; a frequent reflection that challenges assumptions, preparing students to navigate conflict; “Respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection”; critically examine power dynamics and marginalization within SLCE space, and avoid serving purely neoliberal interests. She further highlights several strategies of approach. She recommends a “head, heart, and hands” model of SLCE, which engages students’ intellect, emotions, and actions. She also emphasizes the importance of authentic relationships to community life. One-on-one

meetings as well as taking what one another says as real to their experience is an integral step in this process. Focus on creating group norms, naming tensions, and exploring big questions around the community are additionally helpful in this model. Examining language use when referring to community partners is a step in the process of unlearning hegemonic ideas around marginality, and as Pasqueri notes, maintaining humility is essential.

The internship considered in this research responds to several elements of critical SLCE highlighted above, namely, a fair-trade learning model. First, the internship, while not in person, was highly immersive. The respective parties involved were in close contact weekly, if not daily, and would spend between 1-2 hours each Friday to communicate synchronously on Zoom. Both the Warren Wilson College contingent as well as the University of Bengkulu contingent were adamant about hearing directly from the voices of those living in Bandung Jaya. The knowledge, needs, and desires of the agrarian community were centered as the primary focus of the internship, and the local leaders were considered valuable, essential actors in the internship dynamic. The internship team was also dedicated to recognizing the power structures at play within the context of the communities involved. Those in Indonesia shared many resources, historical accounts, and personal perspectives on the history of Dutch colonialism and its later effect on the development of rural life and ethnic relations in Sumatra. Those in the United States learned directly from those affected how power relations between the local community and the federal government of Indonesia play into these historical legacies. The researchers grappled with many questions regarding their roles in the larger goal of the work being done. The American undergraduate student was asked to consider the ways her whiteness and economic privilege interacted with the dynamics of the team, and such relations of power were closely analyzed and openly acknowledged. Finally, the researchers contended with the ways that this internship could contribute to an ethic of social justice. The work of the internship did not serve purely neoliberal interests; rather, the advertising mission of the website was intended to publicize the agency of those often marginalized in broader, global discussions of sustainable development. The focus on highlighting women-led initiatives in Bandung Jaya was also important to the larger project of global, intersectional feminism.

a

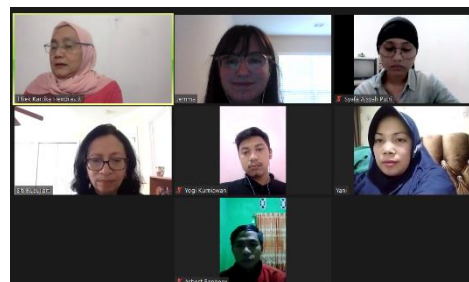




Fig. 1. (a) Internship team on Zoom (b) School of SDGs website homepage.

3. Findings

3.1 Website Design and Implementation

As a primary task of developing a website to advertise the school of SDGs in Bandung Jaya, it was vital for the researchers to identify the main components of the website, as well as what information needed to be collected to create these elements. In full group discussions, all parties were able to articulate the sections of the website that they wanted to see. In totality, the following components were approved: a “Home,” “About,” “Media,” “Events,” “Contact,” page, and a specific history of Bandung Jaya (see Fig. 1(b)). To develop these various subsections, it was important for the researchers to obtain primary and secondary source histories of the Bandung Jaya area. The researchers looked at journal articles chronicling the debates around land use in Bandung Jaya and neighboring villages as well as conducted an in-depth, semi-formal interview with an activist from the not-for-profit Akar Foundation (Website: <https://akar.or.id/>). The Akar Foundation is committed to settling land disputes between agrarian communities and government officials, helping to negotiate compromises between the often-opposing parties. Through the interview, the researchers were able to understand how a colonial legacy has impacted the development of agriculture in the region. The appropriation of indigenous land for plantation use during the era of Dutch occupation has had a lasting effect on land control, as this land was taken on by the central government after independence with few clear boundaries of ownership rights. Land disputes had reached an all-time high in recent years, with a collective historical trauma of ongoing hostilities. The researchers were also able to uncover how a women-led community, through the assistance of mediators from the Akar Foundation, were able to use traditional socialization of femininity to their advantage, advancing the conversation with central government officials to reach a compromise on land use plans. The community of Bandung Jaya and the government representatives participated in a collective mapping activity, crafting official boundaries of the previously disputed territory. These firsthand accounts were integrated into the website to paint a full portrait of the

community’s intentions and commitments to sustainable land use.

Another important element of the website design process was compiling a mixed media collection of photos, videos, and maps to further articulate the accomplishments of the community. Through these mediums, the researchers were able to have conversations directly with the community members that helped to further highlight sustainable development initiatives. Through photographs such as Fig. 2(a), the researchers learned about Bandung Jaya’s waste management programs which involve men, women, and children in the community to collect litter and recycle plastic waste. Fig. 2(b) shows the use of recycled material to create crafts for sale, such as handmade purses.

a.



b.



Fig. 2. (a) Bandung Jaya community members collecting waste (b) Handmade purses from recycled material

3.2 Knowledge Sharing

One mutually beneficial aspect to this internship was the ability for the researchers, the team at the SDGs Center, and the community members of Bandung Jaya to share knowledge around a variety of topics. The researchers from Warren Wilson College presented their experiences with American liberal arts higher education, as a parallel model to the student volunteers’ education at the University of Bengkulu (and the SDGs Center). The students from the

University of Bengkulu also presented their experiences at a large research institution, and the two parties were able to compare and contrast these two structures of undergraduate life, both with an emphasis on community engagement. Furthermore, the community members from Bandung Jaya were also able to contribute their expertise in agricultural processes, foreign to the researchers. Through conversations and photo collections, the community leaders explained the complex procedure for civet coffee production, a highly sought-after type of coffee. This process involves passively allowing local civet populations to feed on coffee cherries, collecting the bio-waste of civets, and processing and packaging the digested coffee cherries into marketable beans. The community members also explained their innovative composting techniques to grow fresh vegetables, highlighting the use of cow manure in a cyclical, sustainable local ecosystem. Through these knowledge-sharing sessions, all parties were able to gain insight into the lived experiences of one another without centering one experience as more “legitimate” or “expertise” than another. In this sense, the internship allowed for a multitude of epistemologies to co-exist without competing or posing in conflict with each other.

3.3 Challenges and Strengths

One of the primary challenges to this international internship was the language barrier. The undergraduate researchers from Warren Wilson College did not speak Indonesian at the time, and while many team members in Bengkulu did speak English, there were varying degrees of fluency. The community members from Bandung Jaya did not speak English, and there was always a need for a translator. One of the student volunteers from the SDGs Center served as the primary translator, with others stepping into her role when she was absent. This multilingual communication required careful deliberation and active listening so as not to misinterpret information on either side, particularly when learning from the Bandung Jaya community leaders. In considering the postcolonial power dynamics of the internship demographics, it was vital that the community members felt understood and heard; with the website design largely in the hands of the white American researcher, it was integral to the goals of the partnership that the internship allows the voices of the indigenous community at hand to come through. As much as possible, the researchers did not want to recreate harmful power structures in which indigenous knowledge is filtered through a Western lens. Therefore, all participating parties read aloud and reviewed the website collectively through all stages of its formation to ensure that the community members felt accurately reflected (through English translation). In this sense, the immersive virtual internship

“Number of Cumulative Cases of Coronavirus (COVID-19) Worldwide from January 22, 2020 to September 26, 2021, By Day.” *Statistica*, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1103040/cumulative-coronavirus-covid19-cases-number-worldwide-by-day/>

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acknowledges the shortcomings of many international service-learning projects as identified in the literature, and instead aimed for a model of critical community engagement.

Conclusions

While COVID-19 presented many barriers to international travel, its emergent technologies opened new pathways to explore community engagement across national borders. Through a framework of critical service-learning, the researchers crafted an internship with a dynamic network of students, faculty, and community leaders along the lines of sustainable agriculture and waste management. The researchers explored a realm of “hard” and “soft” skills, creating a brand-new website for the women-led community of Bandung Jaya, while also examining complex issues of colonial legacy, multilingualism, intercultural communication, global power dynamics, and community agency. Through an immersive, synchronous experience, the researchers found new ways of connecting students, faculty, and community organizers across the world; sharing lived experiences; and collectivizing knowledge in the interest of women’s empowerment and local sustainability.

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