International Forensics Collaborations in Debate as a Tool for Empowerment Advancing Global Learning, Cultural Understanding and Critical Dialogue

Kenneth A. Newby1 and Joyce Pittman**

1Department of English, Morehouse College Forensics Program, Morehouse College, Atlanta, USA
2Department of Educational Leadership and Management, Drexel University, Philadelphia, USA

Abstract

In previous JTH articles, Dr. Joyce Pittman’s conversations were centered around understanding different dimensions of educational tourism and their relationship to building social capital, advancing global learning in higher education, and utilizing technological advances to close the education and digital divides, especially in third world regimes. This article advances dialogue from identifying the issues that plague those in the third world to exploring potential solutions to empower them. International forensics, specifically parliamentary debate, has emerged as a new potential tool in the conversation about global learning, cultural exchange, and closing the educational divide.

This editorial collaborative article supports the ongoing argument that educational tourism is essential to establish and sustain global education and understanding. The collaborative researcher, Kenneth Newby, an accomplished lawyer, national championship debate coach, and emerging scholar, traveled to Cameroon to share his knowledge of argumentation and debate. Internationalism recently emerged in his pedagogy as central to his work concerning the importance of debate in bridging differences worldwide no matter what the subject—the rules of engagement for critical dialogue remain the same.

The retrospective case study methodology employed here involves a narrative discussion of an educational tourism forensics project in Cameroon a bilingual, developing nation still feeling the effects of French colonialism. The weeklong seminar series, composed of lectures, drills, and practice exercises, was designed to teach young African scholars how to improve their critical thinking, presentation and argumentation skills. The researcher takes us on a journey with him that shows how he, along with other scholars, were able to successfully bring global learning and collaboration to an international university campus through human voices without using modern technological resources. In conclusion, the forefront of making this project a success was not technology, but face-to-face interaction that allowed new global voices to emerge and inspire a people.

Keywords: Collaboration; Educational tourism; Debate; Action-oriented research; International education; Educational; Digital equity

Introduction

Educational tourism developed because of the growing popularity of teaching and learning of knowledge, and enhancing technical competency, outside of the classroom environment. In educational tourism, the main focus of the tour is customarily visiting another country to learn about the culture, or apply skills learned inside the classroom in a different environment. Many articles about educational tourism focus on the incredible amount of revenue generated by education-related tourists. For example, Australia’s fastest-growing and most valuable international tourism market, China, is particularly dependent on education, with 60 percent of the $2.8 billion expenditure from education visitors [1-3]. However, debate training as a form of educational tourism proves that educational tourism offers more than another mechanism for short-term economic growth. Instead, this case study reveals that this form of tourism can be empowering and transformative especially for developing nations.

Resources and Methods

Many experts have noted that educational travel is playing an increasing role for learners and the communities they visit. I am no exception. I began my career as young debater in the United States more than twenty-five years ago. As a debater, with the exception of having the privilege to be a part of the first team from an HBCU to participate in the World Universities Debating championship, I found my international exposure in debate limited. Having migrated from an award-winning debater to respected attorney and professor of communications, and a national championship debate coach with my team winning the 2013 Pi Kappa Delta National Championship in Parliamentary Debate, I hungered to shared my knowledge of debate globally.

The invitation

Recently, I was honored to be part of delegation of four expert debate trainers organized by the World Debate Institute who traveled to the Catholic University of Cameroon in BAMENDA, Cameroon for a weeklong intensive debate training called the Cameroon Debate Academy (CDA). The invite for my educational tour came from Dr. Alfred Snider of the University of Vermont who serves as director of the World Debate Institute (WDI) and pioneered debate training in the

*Corresponding author: Joyce Pittman, Department of Educational Leadership and Management, Drexel University, Philadelphia, USA, E-mail: joyce.a.pittman@drexel.edu

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Traveling to Cameroon and getting settled in

Cameroon is a developing nation that symbolizes the negative effects of the digital divide. Forty percent of the Cameroonian population is unemployed [4]. Access to the Internet and other such technological resources commonly used by debaters elsewhere to access information about current events is limited by lack of computers, and infrastructure necessary to support the bandwidth necessary to provide those with access a challenge free experience. In Cameroon, people commonly experience social or economic hardships since Cameroon has significant populations of disenfranchised people, or those who are in remote, rural areas.

My trip began with an eight-hour flight from Atlanta, Georgia to Brussels, Belgium with a one-day layover that allowed me to enjoy an authentic Belgian waffle followed by a six and half hour flight to Douala, Cameroon. Douala is a busy port city lined with the hustle and bustle of vendors eager to sell their wares. I rested one night in Douala where I connected with my team of debate trainers. In the morning we headed to Bamenda by local bus. Our bags were thrust to the top of a 20-passenger van forced to seat 30, and we departed on our crowded journey to Bamenda. Bamenda sits in a mountainous region of Cameroon and, although Cameroon is located close to the equator, this area enjoys a cooler climate. As we approached I observed people wearing sweaters and multicolored clothing—a little warm for my taste given the average temperature was 70 degrees Fahrenheit and raining. We unloaded at the muddy bus stop and were transported to our temporary home a 2-story walk up apartment arranged by the University where a warm meal welcomed us. In fact, every meal we enjoyed was typical Cameroonian fare prepared by the apartment’s housemother we lovingly referred to as “Mama”. Mama took quite good care of us, and we were thankful for her tasty, well-balanced meals during our stay. We bedded down for the night, and I cautiously sprayed my insect repellent throughout my room, including on the drapes covering the windows—a traveling tip shared with me by one of my colleagues.

I awoke the next morning mosquito bite free, and eager to start the training. Upon arrival on the CATUC campus, we were greeted by legions of students, professors, and school officials for the opening ceremony of the CDA. More than 85 students would participate in the weeklong training. The daily format consisted of multiple one-hour skill-based lectures, followed by active drills in small group sessions, which were followed by practice debates with intensive feedback to reinforce the skills imparted by the lectures. My main lectures covered such topics as Public Speaking and Refutation. The small group setting provided by our drill sessions offered us an opportunity to help students deal with their specific issues, answer questions about the lecture subject matter, and learn more from our students. On the final day of training we presented the students with electives to provide them some instructional options along with the opportunity to focus on specific issues. Electives included such topics as “Arguments You Should Not Make”, “Arguing About Democracy”, and “Making Your Arguments More Important.” After the training, students participated in a full-scale debate tournament. Video from the CDA is available at https://vimeo.com/channels/566561 including the demonstration debate featuring students and faculty, lectures, over fifty percent of the concluding tournament rounds, and the finals in French and English.

Throughout the training I remained impressed by the students’ commitment to the material and its transformative nature. Students who appeared shy and reticent to speak at the outset of the training were converted to speakers of great force by the end. In observing their change, I was reminded that the true value of learning the art of argumentation lies not in winning competitions or building resumes, but in finding your persuasive voice within for change. This work had a “missionary” feel to it where, instead of teaching students what to think, we taught them how to become better critical thinkers.

Results

Broadening global understandings through debate training

Debate often creates intercultural dialogue that educates the audience along with the debater. No exception to this principle, the CDA expanded and enhanced my understanding of the issues faced by African people. For example, students debated “This House would ban bush meat practice.” These debates educated me on the harvesting of bush meat, meat harvested from the wildlife living in African forests or farms such as sugar cane rats, for consumption and economic benefits. Students also discussed the detrimental health effects of consuming bush meat and the negative impact it often has on the education of children who sell bush meat on the side of the road to support their families. Bush meat practice, however, is not unique to Cameroon and many African nations such as Nigeria, Ghana, and others engage in this practice. The bush meat crisis is a prevalent problem in Africa that endangers many species. Debate and discussion on the issue certainly enhanced my understanding of both sides of the issue.

I believe the CDA also broadened the participants’ knowledge and awareness of issues beyond their Cameroonian experience. Initially, students hesitated to engage in dialogue about political topics such as term limits and greater financial disclosure for public officials, preferring instead issues that related to their own personal experience such as “This House believes parents should not hit their children.” As international debater trainers, my team encouraged the students to think about issues from a global perspective and to discuss those issues in a way that any one from any country regardless of religious, ethnic, or cultural background could appreciate their argument. For example, one common fallacy used in students’ debates initially was an appeal to authority whereby the student justified their position because an authority such as the Bible or the law proscribed a certain action. We helped educate the students that debate about actions does not revolve around what an authority says should be the right course of action, but rather the reasons a particular course of action may be good or bad.

Intercultural exchange

Cameroon is a bilingual nation of French and English speakers. The CDA offered training in both languages to maximize its effectiveness. I found that nearly all of the participants had English proficiency, however, some understandably preferred instruction in their native language of French. Sparking intercultural dialogue between the English and French Cameroonians, we incorporated some topics such as whether Western Cameroon should be an independent state, which enabled a discussion about whether the needs of English-speaking Cameroonians who dominate the Western portion of the country were properly addressed by having one Cameroonian nation. Indeed, Cameroon is a melding of two cultures, one Francophone and one Anglophone. The students also debated whether Cameroon should
adopt one educational system for Franco phones and Anglophones since they are separated in the current educational system. I think the students benefitted greatly from having discussions that caused them to consider both the segregation and unification of two dominant cultures in Cameroon.

Conclusions

Mission accomplished

I think the CDA was effective in achieving its goals and objectives primarily because of the format chosen for the training, and the commitment of the participants to the subject matter. Drills reinforced the skills shared during our short lectures in small group sessions that allowed for individual feedback for each participant. Moreover, the practice debates also served to reinforce the skills delivered in the lecture by offering students an immediate opportunity to practice what they just learned. The students exhibited an insatiable commitment to master the material presented to them. Critical to their success, although challenged, when encouraged they pushed through the challenges of learning how to make their voices heard and persevered.

Lessons learned from educational tour

If empowerment is understood as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain the requisite experiences and skills to exercise control over their own lives, both individually and within their community, then debate training certainly offers the keys to empowerment through communication. Debate training provided a shining example of how educational tourism can support the development of career paths across interdisciplinary sectors. Debate training as a specific type of educational tourism offers the ability to help empower these communities by teaching participants how to have a voice, properly construct rational arguments, and defend those arguments when intellectually challenges. Learning how to debate means learning how to think critically about your opponent’s argument and your own. I can think of no more empowering tool than the ability to think and express oneself persuasively, after all change begins with communication.

My advice for others seeking to use the "academy" model pioneered by Dr. Snider to teach debate would be multi-faceted. First, approach the target population with cultural sensitivity and understanding that their norms may be different than yours. For example, some of the views expressed during some debates were dramatically different than what I ordinarily experience in Western liberal democracy. As an adjudicator, you must judge debates with a tabula rasa mindset, or clean slate, evaluating all arguments presented with an open mind. Second, the social interactions and relationships formed during the educational process are as important as your pedagogy. Many students remarked to me at the end of the training that there were many points where they wanted to give up, but that my positive reinforcement helped them to continue and believe in their own capabilities to excel. While virtual learning tools and online mechanisms of communications such as Skype offer us ways to bridge geographical boundaries, they are an inadequate substitute for real life presence and face-to-face interaction. Third, recognizing that enthusiasm can be contagious, freely share your enthusiasm for your subject matter with your students. You will quickly find that your passion has become theirs. Impassioned learners make great students.

Personally, I believe I may have gained more than I gave from my experience in Cameroon. I often impart argumentation skills to new debaters seeking to win the next competition or bolster their resume, law school application, or chance for internship opportunities. However, teaching students in Cameroon reminded me that these skills serve a higher function. Students at CDA wanted to awaken their inner voices to improve their country. I found that very inspiring. The skills imparted to students of debate are those necessary for them to change the world around them. The transformative impact of my educational tour and seeing participants’ transition from recalcitrant novices to confident competitors gave me greater appreciation for my own field.

In the future

Applying the academy model to international debate trainings, I think Dr. Snider is on to something. Imagine the impact that legions of great debaters could have on the world if they spread those skills to communities where people lacked a voice. In a sense, this is debate missionary work, but unlike many missionaries who bring a specific message of what to think, we help teach people how to think and separate rational arguments from the irrational.

I recognize that the results of this analysis and my "lessons learned” are limited by the fact that these are preliminary and personal observations of one traveler. A more scientific study would need to be designed and implemented to further examine the results, and the short-term and long-term impact that such trainings have on the targeted populations. In addition, more case studies may help confirm whether my experience was unique or typical of an educational tour seeking to share argumentation skills in the developing world.

Going forward I will always be reminded that as debate coaches we do not just teach people how to argue, rather we teach them how to think critically about the world around them so that they can change it for the better. As an educator, this trip has cultivated in me a greater appreciation for the role that educational tourism can play for disempowered constituencies, and I am confident I will accord it greater priority in the future.

References