

Eleven Days in Israel: A Unique and Innovative Experience in Teaching Trauma Practice

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Abstract: In our narratives we share our experiences leading a group of social work and psychology graduate level and continuing education students on an intensive, eleven-day elective course on trauma in the culturally diverse contexts of Israel. We begin with an introduction about our personal rationale for creating the course, follow with the logistical planning including challenges endured over the nearly two year planning period and our individual reactions to the eleven-day journey, and end with a summary of our students' and own learning. We hope that in reading our reflections, others will be inspired toward adventure and will take risks to explore and embark on teaching opportunities outside of the norm.

Keywords: intensive study abroad, trauma and multiculturalism, social work study abroad.

On May 18th, 2014, right after the end of the academic year, we - two co-instructors - headed to Israel with a group of eight students in the helping professions for an elective course designed to understand trauma in cross-cultural contexts. One of us (MP) is a US born social work practitioner and educator with strong personal roots in Reform Judaism, specifically the social action and human rights component, and with social work practice experience and research interest in trauma and posttraumatic growth. The other (RB) is a native Israeli who was raised, studied and practiced in Israel for over two decades before she migrated to the US a quarter of a century ago; however, she still maintains professional connections and travels to Israel frequently to teach in various universities. Trauma and posttraumatic growth have been part of her scholarly and professional expertise throughout her career. Our relationship is over a decade long. It started when the first author was a doctoral student and the second was her dissertation advisor and continued with scholarly collaboration as co-researchers and co-authors as well as friends and in recent years, neighbors. Other than their gender, the all-female group of social work and psychology students was diverse in every possible aspect, including age, ethnic/racial, personal and familial background as well as where they are in their professional education journey and their motivation to participate in the course. Here, we would like to share and reflect on this experience.

In the content that follows, we reveal our stories and experiences, reflecting and discussing those parts that were most meaningful, and offer

lessons learned throughout the journey. We begin with our individual personal rationales for the course, followed by a description of the process of creating and implementing it, and end with our take-away, or "bringing it all back home". We hope that in reading our reflections, others will be inspired toward adventure and will dare to explore and embark on teaching opportunities outside of the traditional.

Personal Rationales

Motivation for developing and facilitating the course had unique meaning for each of us based on our individual backgrounds and histories.

MP: Reflecting on an incredible two-year journey of co-conceptualizing, planning, implementing and evaluating, it feels like only yesterday that my friend, colleague and mentor, Dr. Roni Berger, offered that we co-lead an intensive elective summer course on trauma in Israel. In fact, the suggestion was made mid-summer, 2012, when, just having returned to US soil after an extraordinary two-week Israel journey, filled with politics, human rights and Reform Judaism, I was overflowing with nostalgia and passion for the country, its history and multiculturalism. Thus, I could not have been more excited and enthused by Roni's idea. I could think of no reason, pedagogically nor personally, to hesitate at what seemed an opportunity of a lifetime. I responded to Roni with an unequivocal yes. Two years later I can admit I had absolutely no idea what lay ahead!

RB: For me this course offered the opportunity to view my homeland through a new lens of a diverse

group of individuals whose familiarity with Israel has been fed by the media and thus focused almost exclusively on the on-going political conflicts with its neighbors. It also offered me an opportunity to introduce in the deepest, most personal and experiential way some of the ideas that I try to convey to students about the experience and outcomes of living in an environment that is stressful and potentially traumatic because of consistent geo-socio-political context rather than particular individual events such as an accident, a natural or human-made disaster or a life threatening disease (Quiros & Berger, 2013).

The Process of Creating and Implementing the Course

We learned early on that there is no clear distinction between the steps; rather they are interdependent. For example, students' interest in the course seemed to be based on a combination of curriculum, travel and cost. As we tweaked one, we had to continue to tune the others in an ongoing effort to make the course pedagogically strong, cost effective, and enticing. It was a lot of work. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, we present this cyclically evolving process below in a linear fashion, divided into four parts: Gaining support for the idea, preparatory phase that included educational and logistical aspects, recruitment, and the actual journey.

Gaining support for the idea

With the advice and support of our study abroad office, our own practice wisdom, and a basic collective hunch that even in a bad economy, in a large private institution, there would be enough of a student market for a trauma in Israel course, we moved the planning forward. Steps included seeking the approval of the Dean and administration, writing a formal proposal and submitting to the study abroad office, creating a preliminary syllabus for a three-credit elective course and submitting to curriculum committee and the institutional bodies responsible for approving courses. At each of these steps, we incorporated ideas for revisions that were offered to us.

Preparatory phase

Once the course was approved, we moved ahead with preparations that included educational aspects and the logistical.

Educational aspects. The course was designed to convey to students in an experiential way the understanding of the intersection of two axes that shape the Israeli stress and trauma experience. First, four main types of stressors that frame the Israeli discourse, i.e., intergenerational impact of the Holocaust, ongoing security threat, immigration and poverty. Second, the diversity of Israeli society in terms of religion, ethnic background, immigration status and culture (Jews, Muslim-Arabs, Bedouins, Druze, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, ultraorthodox, secular, etc.). Visits to four schools of social work and seven social service agencies (e.g. mental health clinic, community-based empowerment projects, residential facility for adolescents, service and advocacy center for African labor migrants and asylum seekers) were planned to offer students access to the characteristics, challenges and outcomes of belonging to each of the numerous and diverse population groups in Israel. Emphasis was placed on learning both from lectures and discussions with social workers, directors and clients in the agencies how cultural contexts shape and color the definition, reaction to, and intervention with trauma exposure. We further developed the preliminary syllabus, adding a reading list and assignments (a daily journal and final scholarly paper) that addressed issues of diversity, collective traumas and their intersection and planned visits to support the curriculum. We also negotiated with the field education department on how these visits would fulfill field hours. As visits were confirmed, the syllabus was continuously adapted. For example, to address the issue of African individuals who illegally cross the border through Egypt to seek employment and safety in Israel, we planned to visit a detention center. However, shortly before departure, we learned that visits to the center were no longer permitted and thus we sought and found a human rights organization that serves the same population. The intentional daily weaving in of tourist and cultural sites, and the teaching of history framed the experience within thousands of years of

oppression. As the diverse nature of the prospective student group combination began to emerge, based on previous experience leading study abroad groups (Berger, 2010), some concerns about possible tensions among group members that could impact the learning experience began to arise. Luckily, these concerns proved to be unfounded relative to this particular group.

Logistical aspects. Logistical aspects included determining timing and duration, identifying level of accommodation, comparing and contrasting travel companies' proposals, choosing service providers (the group traveled in a mini bus with a driver and tour guide), and general budgeting. These steps were done in collaboration with our university's international studies department and required many meetings and discussions, including international communication with the various hosts in Israel, to sort out timing that would not conflict with our personal and academic responsibilities, the academic year and availability of presenters in Israel, and Israeli holidays when agencies are closed. Each minute decision had multiple academic and nonacademic implications. For example, the original date of departure, two weeks after graduation, turned out to conflict with the Jewish holiday of Shavuot. Delaying the trip would have conflicted with the end of the academic year in Israel. As a result, we departed before university commencement. This presented bad and good news, i.e., the stress in lack of transition or down time at end of semester and no time for anxiety about all of the what ifs.

Recruitment

The timing of and engaging in activities to inform and recruit students was to take place largely within the four months of Fall semester since a student enrollment deadline of February 15th 2013 was required for the course to ensue, and our Spring semester begins in late January. Flyers detailing the course and student eligibility were distributed electronically and in hard copy across the main campus and three extension sites to students and advisors, especially during the pre-registration period in October. Several rounds of emails from the associate dean's office

reminded students and advisors of the availability of this elective course. The study abroad office posted a web page for inquiry and application, which we monitored to expeditiously interview each applicant to assess their level of knowledge in required topics including basics of human development, principles of intervention in the helping professions and some previous exposure to trauma-related content. Approval of candidates was in collaboration with their academic advisors.

We endured two years of challenges, often colored by those unique to Israel's ongoing political conflicts. Since established as a Jewish state in 1948, Israel lives in a constant threat of war. While this is not news to either of us, we were no less deflated when late in 2012, just as we were making progress with recruitment, war broke out in Israel and as would be expected, our university put a hold on our course. Fall semester ended, and we accepted that the closing down of our course was out of our control. As late January came and the Mideast crisis subsided, the university gave "Trauma in Israel" a green light. With support from our administration, we set out to actively recruit students. Looking back, there were so many variables working against us; the window for enrollment was small, less than one month, and we had lost momentum. Though the crisis in Israel had passed and the environment was relatively calm and stable, the period of unrest was recent. In retrospect, it seems silly to have spent the time and effort we did at that time on recruitment, given the obstacles. By deadline, in mid-February, we had only one deposit. We agreed that at end of summer we would assess the political situation in Israel and if it remained stable, we would review our curriculum, resubmit our proposal for Summer 2014, and begin actively recruiting students again. We agreed on this plan because we believed this was a pedagogically strong and sound course, immersed in a country and cultures that others would be excited to experience. We believed in it, we wanted to make it happen, and we began Fall semester 2013 determined to make it happen. We used the same recruitment procedures as in the prior year adding email via relevant listservs to reach students external to our university who could attend as transfer or continuing education students.

The enrolling of students for the course was

mercurial. The university required a ten-student minimum, and we concluded more than sixteen would compromise the intimacy we were seeking in the teaching and learning experience. On any particular day from start of the 2013-2014 academic year until the extended March 1 deadline, it looked as though either we would never meet our minimum or we would have to turn applicants away. In sum, while recruitment emails often yielded many suitable applicants, the drop-off rate post-acceptance was higher than anticipated. Alas, on March 1, 2014, there were 10 students enrolled with deposits. By first payment due date however, two enrolled students dropped out due to unforeseen personal circumstances. Recognizing the importance of the course, the university was willing to support an eight-student class. In April 2014 we had a class of eight registered, paying, committed students. It may have been only after the close of the two-year planning and recruitment process, at our pre-departure orientation meeting, or it might have been later upon arrival at Ben Gurion Airport in Israel, but it was surely not before then, that we knew and understood the miracle of being in Israel with students to teach a course was about to become a reality. This late realization was probably a good thing as perhaps earlier it could have led to anxious anticipation, which, because of the way the process unfolded, never really happened.

The actual journey

Our reflection on the actual journey includes our pre-departure orientation, experience living together and learning together, and some thoughts on anticipated and unanticipated emotional triggers.

Pre-departure orientation. Our pre-departure orientation combined in person and Skype attendance. After we each introduced ourselves, sharing some personal and professional interests, two topics were addressed. First potential challenges and strategies related to participating in a course in a foreign country were discussed, i.e., stepping out of one's comfort zone, culture shock, etiquette such as acceptable dress code and interpersonal behaviors (e.g. no to offer to shake hands with a religious individual of the

opposite gender) and practical issues (by a representative from our study abroad department). Second, we presented a review of the course and its foci, introduced historical, social and political characteristics of the host society and culture, typical stressors and intergroup dynamics as the context for understanding trauma, discussed assignment and expectations, provided preliminary reading material regarding cultural diversity in Israel and addressed students' questions. We deliberately kept the discussion general because we wanted to minimize pre-visit bias to allow students to experience directly the country, its people, the meaning of trauma to the diverse population groups and the role of social work relative to traumatic experiences. We advised students on the need to maintain flexibility. In the airport on departure day, students were encouraged to think about and express their hopes for the coming eleven days, which motivated us to further consider and express the same.

Living together, learning together. Our formal, explicit curriculum began on the first day in Israel, when we left the airport and set out for a visit to a community of Ethiopians who are served by the social service organization, Friends by Nature in Gedera. Students learned of the challenges of immigration and absorption, highlighted in our host's story of immigration at the age of eight, when from his life as a shepherd ("a bad one") in Ethiopia, he was airlifted with hundreds of others, to Israel via Operation Solomon, later to become an attorney, and now 22 years later, to serve the community in which he was raised. Our host took us to an Ethiopian home where we were served traditional coffees and snacks and had the opportunity to informally chat with our Ethiopian host family, with our tour guide serving as our interpreter. This was our explicit curriculum for the day, but in the evening, as we all walked the beach outside our hotel in Ashkelon, the implicit curriculum, equally important, began evolving and unfolding. There was excitement among us, relationships were being built and a group culture began to take shape. This group culture, the implicit curriculum, would form a foundation for the explicit learning in the days to come and would provide a looking glass into group theory and group dynamics.

Anticipated and unanticipated emotional triggers. Because the various visits and experiences were as diverse as we were, it is probably safe to say that each one evoked strong emotional reaction(s). Visiting a school of social work that exists near the border of Gaza and is vulnerable to ongoing missile attacks (it lost students and offices were destroyed) evoked panic for some that required extra support and hand-holding from faculty, one of whom (the US-born, MP), struggled to be a support while feeling especially vulnerable herself. The visit to the Western Wall and tunnels evoked intense emotion in almost all in the group, especially in the six who were not Jewish and for whom this was a first visit to Israel. Initially, we were a bit taken off guard by the strong reaction. Having visited multiple times, perhaps we are sensitized, and yet as a first experience for most of our students, it was one of the most moving within the eleven days. Another emotionally intense experience was, as expected, Yad Vashem (the national memorial to the Holocaust). Here we were prepared for the strong student reactions, and scheduled a debriefing meeting a day following, in order to provide students ample time to process individually. Some students were particularly moved by the farewell dinner that took place in a restaurant where all waiters are blind and guide the diners who struggle to eat in total darkness.

The interaction with the students and efforts to address their questions forced us to realize how much tacit knowledge about this place we carry and how much needs to be explained in response to even the simplest question to contextualize and make sense of what is being asked. It soon became a slogan of the course that addressing almost every question began with “well, it’s complicated”, or “it says in the Bible...” leading us to realize and acknowledge how every minute aspect of life in this tiny corner of the world is rooted in thousands of years of history. It was clear from the students’ reactions that they related it to aspects of their own lives.

Bringing it All Back Home

In bringing it all back home, we reflect on our learning during the course, specifically through

periodic debriefing sessions, at our wrap-up session two-weeks following return, via informal chats with students, through student assignments, and in our own individual thinking and mutual dialoguing.

Periodic debriefing sessions

We talked about the importance of holding periodic debriefing sessions but knew that, aside for one following Yad Vashem, scheduling the others would best be organically determined. It felt right to have the first one in the evening after the second day because the two first days included intensive encounters with populations foreign to students such as Bedouin residents of an undocumented (and thus not receiving municipal services) village. A major topic that students addressed was the witnessing of the powerful taboo regarding discussion of some topics such as sexual orientation, especially in youth. They were equally intrigued by the immense challenges that social workers encounter in negotiating professional values in the context of unfamiliar cultures. At this first session, we began to see group roles emerging, i.e., internal leader, quiet member, encourager, (Shulman, 2012) and also acknowledged in this early stage of the group development, reliance on us as leaders, approval seeking and a basic sense of harmony (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015). We experienced the students as very polite to one another and to us, and with some expected inhibition.

Our second debriefing session was on a Friday evening, following a day of touring the Old City of Jerusalem including sites that are important to Jews, Christians and Muslims. We were nearly halfway through our trip and had several intense days prior including Sapir College in Sderot, near Gaza and Yad Vashem. We could easily see that the level of comfort between students was strong, emotions high and connections among students visible and palpable. This is where we experienced the implicit curriculum (group support and dynamics) facilitating the explicit curriculum on trauma. One (non-Jewish) student expressed how moved she was by the visit to the Western Wall, another how she admired and was surprised by how Christians from all over the world, in diverse traditional clothes, got together at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and several students choked on

their tears recalling the pictures and details they witnessed about the cruelty of the Holocaust that was previously only a vague abstract concept. One student reported running through the Children's Memorial in Yad Vashem because she could not tolerate the pain.

Leaving Jerusalem we headed to our next overnight stop at a hostel in Zfat, where we informally gathered and chatted on a beautiful outdoor patio overlooking the city. When we arrived at Tel Aviv on the following evening students were excited for the opportunity to spend time walking on the boardwalk and exploring the city. Based on our shared observations of the strong mutual support occurring between the students, we decided to wait until the final day to hold the last debriefing session at the airport. In retrospect, this was a mistake.

Group theory addresses the final phase as one of separation; a time when there may be feelings of loss and even anger (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015). As seasoned group practitioners and social work educators, we ought not have been surprised to witness this around the last days and yet we were. Furthermore, though we anticipated plenty of time at the airport, and planned to meet at the gate for our debriefing, curiously, students were everywhere but at the gate. The airport meeting never happened. After landing in NY, we met at baggage claim, said our goodbyes, and reiterated that we would be meeting again in two weeks for a post-journey wrap-up session.

Wrap-up session

Two weeks had passed after returning to the US, and at last our wrap-up session was held in a similar fashion to our orientation; in person and via Skype attendance. Students were first asked to discuss what they would want in a rerun of the course and then about their "take-aways". While initially there was a level of hesitation in responses that resembled the first debriefing session, very quickly students became forthcoming with recommendations for the course, and with quite intense personal sharing. Some students wished there had been more time for discourse with Israeli social work students,

faculty members, agency workers and clients, and more time to simply explore the country on their own. All reported feeling that the journey was transformative both in terms of cultural exposure and introduction to trauma. They also reported feeling a sense of growth in ability to tolerate unfamiliar and stressful situations individually and interpersonally. The support and connection that was so profound during the middle phase of the journey was once again visible and palpable. In reuniting, it seemed as though, all of a sudden, there was confirmation and trust that the relationships formed during the travels were real and lasting, though naturally would need to be expressed and manifested in a different way.

Informal chats with students

The experience of intensive immersion travel as a method of teaching necessarily led us to know our students (and them us!) in a way that is characteristically different than is typical in a classroom. We spent hours together, often in a mini bus. We ate our meals together. We shared new experiences that took many of us outside of our comfort zones, i.e., the desert heat of Masada, the narrowness and congestion inside the Jerusalem tunnels, the pitch-blackness at dinner in the dark. Essentially, we were vulnerable together, and only in reflecting here and now, do we realize how profoundly the experience of shared vulnerability was part of the implicit curriculum. This atmosphere allowed for an open discussion of how the course content related to students' personal experiences. For example, meeting with a scholar who conducted participatory research with a group of poor women on poverty as a collective trauma, triggered a student to share behaviors she observed in her grandfather from his history of poverty later in life after he became affluent. Such connecting of the personal to the general allowed students to gain better understanding of the nature of traumatic experiences and the effects they have on those exposed. Relating to a discussion of the experience of the Holocaust, one student stated that their stories "reminds me of my own life story... I quickly learned how to swim... My life was not easy but I was determined to make the best of it."

Student assignments

A month after completion of the trip, students submitted a final assignment which required them to identify a specific topic related to stress, trauma, and post traumatic growth in multicultural contexts which emerged for them during the visits and lectures and discuss it from the personal experience combined with relevant theoretical, empirical and practice literature. Students wrote about topics such as the effect of immigration trauma on parent child relationships and the effects on youth of living under constant security threat. In reading our students' final papers, we sensed a transformation on both the personal and professional levels, which is what we thought and hoped would happen. Learning experientially seemed to have facilitated students' self-reflection, an important process in social work practice. For example, one student commented that she could best relate to the experience of a young woman who migrated from Ethiopia and identify with some of her struggles ("to gain perspective about my place in the community and with developing a sense of self that I am happy with. Her story inspires me to use my struggles to help benefit others and to look at them as a potential teaching experience. She inspired me to recognize what it will take for me to overtake the trauma of being a parental child and see this as an achievable goal."). Another whose sibling serves in the US Army was impressed by the use of cohesion in helping soldiers in combat units to cope with traumatic exposure and remarked that "it is only ethical that we, as social workers, advocate for military members and Veterans", and yet another student stated that "the trip was therapeutic and it changed my views on trauma. It allowed me to understand my own trauma and provided me with tools to start my own healing process. Even reading the literature for this trip was insightful. My role as an upcoming social worker is to take what I learned from this trip and apply it as part of my practice in the future". The course seemed to evoke an interest in learning more about specific population groups and also about specific trauma-related content. As a profession committed to ongoing inquiry and life-long learning, this delighted us.

Individual thinking and mutual dialoguing

Similar to how we began, with the individual sharing of our personal rationales, so too we now end with our individual reflections.

MP: Though I had absolutely no idea what lay ahead when I unequivocally agreed to co-teach "Trauma in Israel" with Roni, I would (and hope to) do it again, as soon as Summer, 2015. From an academic standpoint, as is the case in teaching any course, it is always important to me to teach a course again, in hopes of ironing out some of the wrinkles. Here, I learned that students need more down time. In fact, there was a time I overheard one student say to another, "Roni and Lyn have a lot of energy", and then the other respond, "Well, I guess you have to in order to get your PhD". While I enjoyed hearing that, and sharing it with Roni, and while in fact Roni and I each do have a lot of energy, I think we took for granted that others would have the same level of energy, which was just not the case. I also learned to expect the unexpected (e.g. reactions at Western Wall), and to expect the expected (group development). I learned it is important for me to do less of the work, and to allow the students to do more (an ongoing teaching challenge), and to trust the learning and growth process more and intervene less (something that took me a long time to learn in practice and is taking me equally as long to learn in teaching).

On a more personal level, this was the first time I co-taught a course, and it was an immersion course, with my mentor, friend and neighbor. There was risk involved, i.e., jeopardizing the relationship, and I had not even considered it. As expected in co-leadership of any type, leaders often have different personalities, and this is the case of Roni and me and though we knew it, I had not thought of the possibility of how it might play out as we traveled in the close quarters of our mini bus. Though we did not always see eye-to-eye, I think we each provided balance for the other (one of us has a tendency to be overly compromising, and the other a tendency to be direct - guess which is which!). Nonetheless, there was always mutual respect, its explicit expression part of the implicit curriculum. We twelve travelers (including our bus driver and tour guide) were not only a group but in

many ways a family, and for all intent and purpose, a well functioning one with clear and honest communication. Though Roni and I live only two blocks apart in NY City, because of our hectic schedules, it wasn't until the wrap-up session, two weeks after our return to NY, that we met again and had the opportunity to debrief amongst ourselves. The time lapse gave us the ability to fully process and consider how we did as co-teachers and as friends, and in general along our travels, and be able to share our feelings about it with each other in an honest and forthright way, which I appreciate beyond words.

RB: As Lyn correctly points out, we are very different in our personalities, backgrounds and experiences. In addition, I came to this adventure with a lot of experience in teaching immersion courses, including study abroad, across the globe in cultures as diverse as Australia, Hong Kong, Nepal, Ghana and Israel and consequently had a somewhat clearer idea as to what was to come. Finally, I went back home to a place where my roots are that I visit frequently, know the language and the culture and therefore am familiar with the nuances that can be mysterious to outsiders. Thus, it should come as no surprise that our reflections differ too.

I was interested in observing how sights and interactions that come natural to me affect those for whom they are not. Similar to my experience of parenting, when my son's reactions taught me to see familiar places and events through a fresh lens by observing his reactions, I learned new ways of seeing my homeland and its people through the eyes of my co-travelers. In spite of all these differences, I whole heartedly do agree with Lyn - if the opportunities becomes available, I will do it again together with her.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

What can social work educators who contemplate developing and leading a study abroad course take from our experience? Which recommendations can we offer? What are some do's and don'ts?

Our goal was for students to develop the ability to recognize and communicate their

understanding of the importance of diversity in shaping the interpretation of and coping with traumatic exposure in individuals, families and communities from different ethnic cultural and religious backgrounds, identify the effects of multiple traumas and acquire skills in practicing from a culturally sensitive perspective.

While a detailed analysis of the use of an intensive study abroad course for teaching trauma related content has been elaborated elsewhere (Berger & Paul, under review), our experience suggests the benefits of teaching about issues and services in social work in a format that combines direct interaction with those both on the providing and the receiving sides of services within the context of actually experiencing diversity rather than just reading and hearing about it.

Such an endeavor requires careful planning of a curriculum that incorporates lectures, agency visits, structured and informal group and individual discussions as well as opportunities for processing and relaxation. Future research can be helpful in identifying for which content in social work education such a course is effective, what potential barriers are and which are effective in addressing them.

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