

Learning Through Disruptions

Equipping Students to Cope With Challenging Contexts Through a Field-based Course in Africa

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Learning through disruptions: Equipping students to cope with challenging contexts through a field-based course in Africa

Introduction

In today's fast-changing global economy, business and working life are often characterized by uncertainty, discomfort, complexity and "messy ambiguities" (Powley & Taylor, 2014; Schoemaker, 2008, p. 121). Students seeking to pursue careers in international business in the developing world need to learn abilities to deal with uncertain and sometimes extreme environments (Walsh, 2015). These include the ability to cope with physically and emotionally challenging situations, to learn from and collaborate effectively with others very different from oneself, to tolerate unpredictability and failure, and to engage in problem-solving under trying conditions (Doyle et al. 2004; Schoemaker, 2008; Taras et al. 2013; Tavanti & Vedramini, 2014). Learning such abilities requires "direct, meaningful experience" (Gordon, 2008, p. 771) that extends beyond the acquisition of cognitive abilities and functional knowledge. Mainstream business education is not exactly stellar at enabling such learning, however, as critiques have indicated (Clinebell & Clinebell, 2008; Powley & Taylor, 2014; Schlegelmilch & Thomas, 2011).

In this paper, we inquire into whether and how a field course can help to develop these abilities in students. Our study is based on students' experiences during a three-week immersive field-based course in East Africa, held in connection with an MSc program at a major Scandinavian business school (hereafter S-BS). The course involves S-BS students collaborating in groups, with local students they do not know, in writing a graded assignment to a tight deadline, based on fieldwork in a developing country context, and is therefore highly demanding. Taking our point of departure in Kolb & Kolb's (2005, 2009) experiential learning theory (ELT), we show that if carefully

orchestrated and handled, this challenging “bottom-up” experience can trigger disruptions to students’ assumptions and world views. This will in turn produce dissonance that triggers the ELT cycle, resulting in a learning space that fosters self-reported learning of several of the previous mentioned abilities. We identify three main types of disruptions: intense sensory impressions and sensations, loss of predictability and control, and learning interdependency, and we present a model depicting the key processes and learning outcomes involved. We further suggest how business schools might design learning spaces that enable such disruptions closer to home than East Africa.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the concept of “disruption” and how it relates to “dissonance”, and situate this within ELT and literature on field-based learning experiences in management education and beyond. Second, we describe our field-based course, followed by the methodology. Third, we present data showing the disruptions experienced by the students. Finally, we discuss our findings and the model that we propose before we conclude and discuss the limitations and implications for management education.

Learning through disruptions

Several major learning theories describe the learning potential of orchestrating experiences in which students are actively, bodily and emotionally engaged in authentic learning situations that disrupt their habitual assumptions and world views, producing cognitive dissonance, i.e., “psychological discomfort that arises from inconsistencies in beliefs, expectations, or experiences”

(Festinger, 1957). Such dissonance is thought to trigger emotions that induce reflection and open students to new insights and possibilities for action (Allen & Young, 1997; Dewey, 2005; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Malkki & Green, 2014; Mezirow, 2008, 1994) but is also often an uneasy experience involving discomfort, resistance and difficult emotions like anxiety, fear or anger as students are

moved out of their “comfort zones” (Malkki, 2019). For instance, Piaget’s (1970) theory of cognitive development posits that when learners encounter new information that cannot be explained using their existing schemas, this has a destabilizing effect, leading to an experience of *disequilibrium* that ultimately compels them to modify or change their schemas in order to return to equilibrium. Along similar lines, Mezirow’s (2008, 1994) transformative learning theory holds that learners’ perspectives can be transformed through *disorienting dilemmas*—critical episodes or crises that trigger uncomfortable emotions, prompting them to question their existing assumptions and world views. ELT (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) likewise foregrounds the role played by disruptive experiences in bringing about learning, defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41), a process thought to be driven by “conflict, differences, and disagreement” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194).

Drawing on ELT, in this paper we use the term *disruption* to denote particular concrete experiences that disrupt students’ assumptions, jolting them out of their comfort zones. These “bottom-up” student experiences are made possible by the “top-down” orchestration of learning by the course instructors. We posit that specific *types* of disruption resulting from the interplay between the top-down orchestration and the bottom-up experience are likely to generate dissonance, i.e. feelings of discomfort that in turn trigger the ELT learning cycle. This cycle involves four interrelated dimensions: *concrete experience*, *abstract conceptualization*, *reflective observation*, and *active experimentation* (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). To achieve deep learning, learners must “touch[es] all the bases”—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting in a way that is relevant to the learning situation and topic, thereby integrating all four dimensions (Kolb et al., 2001, p. 22; Kolb & Kolb, 2009). The tensions between these different dimensions are thought to produce *learning spaces*, which are shaped “both by objective factors such as the physical setting and time

available for learning and by subjective factors such as learning preferences and expectations” (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p. 320; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The challenge for business educators is how to design the right kind of top-down orchestration that enables concrete experiences that, in turn, produce disruptions and ensuing dissonance that constitute learning spaces in which students can acquire the abilities needed to cope with challenging and unfamiliar contexts. At business schools, various forms of experiential and active learning in which students engage with the “real world” are nowadays commonplace (Baden & Parkes, 2013) and are recognized as crucial for quality learning (AACSB, 2020). However, they vary greatly with respect to the type of disruption and degree of dissonance occasioned, as we discuss below.

Top-down framing: Orchestrating disruptive experiences in management education

At business schools, the most common experiential activities still involve classroom-based activities such as guest lecturers (Van Hoek et al., 2011), case-based learning in which students analyse a real-life business problem and develop recommendations for solving it (Bridgman et al., 2016), role-plays and simulations in which students try to solve real or hypothetical problems and which may be blended learning-based (e.g., computer-based simulations) (Beckem, 2012; Kaynak et al., 2012; Rudra et al., 2011; Salas et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2009), or include videos, audio or photos to evoke an authentic business environment (Gabrielsson et al., 2010). Such interventions have been found to make business students more knowledgeable, and improve their decision-making abilities, social and collaborative skills, and career opportunities, inter alia (Kosnik et al., 2013; Sanahuja & Ribes, 2015). However, they do not usually equip students to cope with highly uncertain environments and non-routine challenges, since students generally remain in their “safe” classrooms or environments (Dachner et al., 2017; Powley & Taylor, 2014) and disruptions and

dissonance are therefore greatly minimized. Gordon (2008, pp. 771, 777) notes that the messy realities that business students will meet on the ground in the developing world cannot be reflected in conventional teaching forms, such as cases, with their “tractable solutions” to problems and which are usually highly structured and call mostly for cognitive engagement rather than involving students’ emotions, feelings and personality and encouraging reflexivity; and require little or no personal involvement with the environment in which the cases are embedded, nor collaboration with local people as would often be required in a real-world working scenario (Baden & Parkes, 2013; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006).

Other teaching approaches achieve experiential learning by taking students outside the classroom *virtually* through global teamwork on a common project conducted using online collaboration tools, with a view to strengthening their global competencies and cross-cultural skills (Poór et al., 2016; Taras et al., 2012, 2013). Students are challenged by linguistic, cultural, time-zone, and collaboration difficulties that can result in dissonance in the form of frustration, disorientation and anger that can produce powerful learning outcomes, including enhancing students’ cultural intelligence and reducing prejudices and perceptions of differences (Taras et al., 2012, 2013). Direct physical experience of unfamiliar contexts and peers is, however, obviously missing from such virtual interaction, thus omitting an important corporeal source of disruptions and dissonance (cf. Viswanathan, 2012 on the limits of virtual immersion). Other interventions move students *physically* outside the classroom through e.g., on-site visits to companies (Balan & Metcalfe, 2012), consultancy-based assignments (Van Hoek et al., 2013), exchange stays at foreign universities (Ghebreyesus, 2004), or internship placements at a firm or organization (see e.g., Gerken et al., 2012; Hergert, 2009; Sanahuja & Ribes, 2015). These activities are valuable in preparing students for their professional careers and strengthening their networks and interpersonal skills, *inter alia* (Gerken et al., 2012), but they are still typically carried out at a firm, organization, or another

university that, even if located abroad, often closely resembles similar firms or organizations back home (Allen & Young, 1997; Sanahuja & Ribes, 2015); and where students carry out study or work tasks that are normally tightly predefined in course descriptions or internship contracts (see e.g., Finley et al., 2007; Hergert, 2009; Sanahuja & Ribes, 2015), thus mitigating potentially disruptive experiences.

Field-based learning: disruptions triggered by bottom-up experiences in radically different contexts

Field-based learning experiences that immerse students in radically different (often developing country) contexts have been reported to trigger disruptions that lead to more intense dissonance, and learning outcomes as outlined earlier, particularly if this involves learning by doing through engaging with “real-world problems or authentic situations” in the new location (Munge et al., 2018, p. 40; Forte & Rusinov, 2014; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006; Tavanti & Vedramini, 2014). Field-based learning typically has a strong bottom-up learning component, which implies that students are immersed in a new environment and culture and are encouraged to go in with an open-mind, expecting to learn from experience (Viswanathan, 2016). According to Viswanathan (2016, p. 63) bottom-up learning helps students to “gain insights from ‘data’ rather than viewing situations through previously held concepts” and becomes particularly important when “working with unfamiliar and fundamentally different, resource constrained contexts fraught with uncertainty—for example, a poverty context” (Viswanathan, 2016, p. 63).

While students can be exposed to radically different contexts in their own countries (e.g., poverty in the US—see Viswanathan, 2011, 2012), Kwok et al. (1994, p. 618) posit that “out-of-country experiences are particularly effective ways to broaden and deepen students’ understanding about the complexities and realities of international business”, and Finley et al. (2007) found that graduate

business students perceived greater learning value from study trips that took them out of their familiar (Western European) context.

Field-based learning differs from conventional study trips where students typically visit the field as passive observers, in that it involves greater opportunities for autonomous research and self-discovery (Krakowa, 2012), deeper immersion through an intense and exclusive focus on one subject or class (Thomas & Roberts, 2009), and often, collaboration both among visiting students (Munge et al., 2018, p. 46) and with local students, residents and/or communities (Krakowa, 2012; Marchioro, 2009). Such collaboration can strengthen intercultural understanding and learning both among visiting and local students (Hoalst-Pullen & Gatrell, 2011), enabling a shift from a teacher-dependent approach towards greater autonomy through joint activities such as group-based problem-oriented inquiry, data gathering and analysis (Hanson & Deluliis, 2015; Kent et al., 1997). These activities are underpinned by a social constructivist approach to learning in which students “construct new knowledge from their experiences by interacting with other people and the environment” (Wickam, 2018, p. 165), making use of one another’s resources, knowledge, competences, and feedback (cf. Vygotsky, 1978) and thereby developing self-direction and ownership of learning (Knowles, 1970).

For instance, Viswanathan et al. (2011) describe an innovative course where students experienced immersion in “Subsistence Marketplace” contexts in different regions in India, conducting interdisciplinary group projects involving market research in close collaboration with subsistence communities. Viswanathan (2012, p. 415) stresses that such immersion in a radically different context is “very powerful and brings about project insights that cannot be replicated remotely”. The face-to-face interviews with subsistence consumers and entrepreneurs and the direct observations of their living conditions and environments enable learning outcomes that cannot be captured through other means. Gordon (2008) shows how immersion in the field in

developing countries exposes business students to local logics, daily realities, physical sensations, and emotions that challenge their Western perspectives and provide a contextual understanding of poverty issues. Sroufe et al. (2015) demonstrate how exposing students to radically different realities (e.g., poverty), combined with working closely together with local students and engaging in research on sustainability during fieldwork, developed business students' values, sense of responsibility, cultural empathy, systems thinking skills, and confidence. Allen and Young (1997, p. 177) describe how a field-based course in Mexico “forced the students out of the comfort zones”, and how “unexpected glitches and other vicissitudes” such as frustrations related to travel delays, cancelled appointments and “cross-cultural shocks” disrupted students' habitual routines and world views, constituting “powerful teachable moments” (Allen & Young, 1997, p. 183).

Similar learning outcomes have been reported from global service learning (GSL)¹ courses (Hartman, 2018; Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008; Pless et al., 2011; Wickam, 2018; Yorio & Ye, 2012), in which students are immersed in a “real-life setting” (Gerholz & Losch, 2015) characterized by unpredictability, lack of control, messiness, and emotional, uncomfortable and disorienting situations that can profoundly disrupt their world views and sense of privilege (Hartman & Kieley, 2014) and, notably in North–South partnerships, increase their awareness of injustice, inequality and power asymmetries (Bathum & Whitaker, 2014; Lesnick, 2017).

Kiely (2005, p. 8) notes that the dissonance resulting from such disruptive experiences can be historical, environmental, social, physical, economic, political, cultural, spiritual, communicative, or technological, and that it may also vary in *degree*. “Low-intensity” dissonance may involve language barriers or environmental discomfort such as bothersome insects or heat that students can adjust to relatively quickly by acquiring new knowledge or skills and which only have a short-term

¹ Which involves carrying out a service activity that benefits a community (sometimes in partnership), combining academic knowledge with civic engagement (Gerholz & Losch, 2015; Wickam, 2018).

effect; whereas “high-intensity” dissonance arises from experiences that cause powerful emotions and cannot be resolved through acquiring knowledge or skills, e.g., shocking experiences of inequality, which may continue to impact participants for years. However, both the type and intensity of dissonance experienced by students are thought to depend on “the gap or incongruence that students experience between their contextual baggage and elements of the new cultural context” (Kiely, 2005, p. 10). Hartman et al. (2018, p. 5), for instance, report how students exposed to “destabilizing experiences” during GSL experienced different types and levels of dissonance, ranging from transportation challenges to witnessing children rummaging through garbage in search of food. It should be noted that what Hartman here refers to as *dissonance* is not distinguished from the destabilizing experiences (*disruptions* in our terminology) that cause it, as we have done in our approach.

Overall, the literature suggests that field-based courses can move students outside their comfort zones, producing disruptions and resulting dissonances that prompt them to become more curious and open to new ideas (Kent et al., 1997), facilitating deeper learning (Boyle et al., 2007; Hope, 2007; Krakowka, 2012; Mock & Godwyn, 2012; Robson, 2002), and enabling many of the needed learning outcomes identified in the introduction (Boyle et al., 2007; Doyle et al., 2004; Finley et al., 2007; Fuller et al., 2006; Hope, 2009; Kolb & Kolb, 2009; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006; Munge et al., 2018; Robson, 2002; Sanahuja & Ribes, 2015). They also provide opportunities for hands-on, collaborative student-driven learning experiences that involve the “whole student”, simultaneously including relational dimensions, emotions, and physical sensations, to a greater degree than routine, linear, cognitively and individually oriented classroom teaching (Bamberger & Tal, 2006, p. 77; Sanahuja & Ribes, 2015; Hope, 2009). Management education scholars have specifically called for such integral forms of learning that take account of situational and bodily dimensions that can counter “cogni-centrism” and foster the wisdom needed to deal with today’s complex management

challenges (Kuepers & Pauleen, 2015, p. 494). Kiely (2005) reports a particular need for studies that investigate the *contextual* factors that give rise to specific learning outcomes.

In this paper, we show how an immersive field course can create contextual conditions that create learning space that affect the *whole student* through specific types of disruptions that produce dissonance that can trigger the ELT cycle, and foster desired learning outcomes.

The field course

The field course is an elective offered, since 2012, on an MSc program combining business with development studies at S-BS. The course was developed following a request from a group of students and aims to offer students an opportunity to apply theories and methods from business and development studies to a practical situation, to strengthen their intercultural skills, and to sensitize them to the challenges of doing fieldwork and data collection in a developing country context. The course involves a three-week field trip to an East African country (EAC), where students do field research together with students from a local business school (EA-BS). The second and third authors developed and taught the course together with long-standing EA-BS colleagues. Both S-BS teachers had long-term experience of conducting fieldwork in Africa, including the EAC. Interested students apply and are selected based on a motivation letter. Twenty-four students are enrolled each year, all in their mid-twenties and of mixed nationalities (majority Scandinavian), and around two-thirds are females. Students must cover most of the course expenses themselves, amounting to about 1500 USD. This fee may prevent some students from participating, though we do not have evidence showing this.

The course consists of four modules (the top-down orchestration): 1) preparatory lectures prior to the field trip to introduce students to key issues pertaining to business studies in the EAC, and an introduction to the EAC context and teamwork; 2) a three-week field trip to the EAC where

students work in groups (of four) with peers from the local business school (two S-BS and two EA-BS students) and carry out field research on self-selected topics within the broad theme of entrepreneurship and private sector development; 3) back home, follow-up lectures and supervision focused on drafting a 15-page exam assignment (in groups of two); and 4) assessment, based on the written project combined with an oral examination (40 minutes per group).

The EAC course component comprises three elements: i) lectures and group sessions on research question formulation, methods, and intercultural team work during which the students decide on a research question and methods (2 days); ii) field research during which groups conduct interviews, observations, and/or focus group discussions in the field (1.5 weeks); iii) initial analysis of data, report writing, oral presentation of findings to all students and teachers, who provide feedback; and iv) evaluation (1 week). The students receive close daily supervision from the S-BS and EA-BS teachers as needed, though each group is required to meet their supervisors at least three times for: a) approval of topic and research question; b) comments on their data-gathering tool before moving to data collection; and c) supervisor accompanies the group at least once to the field, observing and giving feedback on the data-gathering process. Group work dynamics are also discussed during the supervision sessions.

Methodology

We initiated the research after conducting the field course twice. Witnessing highly positive feedback from all students, we were curious to investigate further students' experiences. Data were generated through focus group discussions (FGDs) with students, and anonymous student evaluations of the course. While recognizing that teachers' perspectives would have offered important insights into aspects such as course delivery and organizational and personal challenges, we focus here on students since we wanted to gain a better understanding of how they experienced

the course, and because very little is known about the experiences of Europeans studying in Africa (Coleman & Chafer, 2011). The student evaluations provided formalized, immediate and individual assessment by the students (see following), while the FGDs enabled in-depth reports of the learnings in dialogue with fellow students and provided a space for students to make sense of their field trip experiences through “retrospective introspection” (Bloor et al. 2001) and used with open-ended questions, the method can “reflect issues and concerns salient to participants rather than closely following the researcher’s agenda...[which] can yield surprises” (Barbour, 2007). Three two-hour FGDs were held with three cohorts of S-BS students, who participated in the field course in 2012 (FGD 1), 2013 (FGD 2) and 2014 (FGD 3). Seventeen students (6, 5 and 6 students from these cohorts), participated. Participants were recruited via an email sent to all course participants over the three years. All interested students were invited, however this might have led less satisfied students to not take part.

The interviews were carried out several months after the students’ return home to allow time for reflection (cf. Medina-López-Portillo, 2004, p. 191). The time span was intended to allow the students to digest their experiences and potentially separate their immediate assessment, captured in two formal evaluations (cf. below), from longer-term learning. The disadvantage is that important (critical and/or painful) events may have been forgotten. The FGDs were loosely steered by a semi-structured interview guide comprising six questions. Students were asked: 1) to brainstorm images, words and/or impressions from the field course, and to describe any particularly memorable experiences; 2) whether the course had motivated them to study the MSc program; 3) to reflect on what they had learned from the field course; 4) their opinions about alignment between their learning experience, grade, and exam format; 5) to reflect on the longer-term impact the course had had on them; and 6) to suggest recommendations for changes to the course. The first author (who

was not involved in the field course) conducted the interviews, while the other two authors took notes and asked follow-up questions. The discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The focus group data were supplemented with data from two different anonymous student evaluations. The first was a handwritten evaluation by all students (S-BS and EA-BS) on their final day in the EAC, and comprised Likert-scale questions regarding their experiences and perceptions of the field course, as well as open-ended questions describing suggestions for improvement and their “most important learning experiences”. All 72 S-BS students from the three cohorts responded to the evaluation. The second evaluation was a standard S-BS course evaluation, comprising Likert-scale questions regarding academic outcomes, syllabus, and teachers’ performance, and space for qualitative comments. Fifty percent of the students from years 2012 and 2013, and 95 percent of students from year 2014 responded (43 in total). In this paper, we refer exclusively to the qualitative comments.

All data were coded by two of the authors working together, using an inductive, *data driven* approach (Gibbs, 2007) facilitated by NVivo 11. In line with the definitions in our literature review, we identified “disruptions” as episodes that the students considered puzzling, frustrating, challenging/problematic, or surprising/unexpected, and which caused them to reflect on their habitual assumptions or behaviors. Figure 1 depicts how we moved from first- and second-order codes to aggregate themes. Following Gioia, Corley and Hamilson (2013), we derived first-order codes from grouping similar excerpts together in thematic groups. These were abstracted into second-order codes. We then distilled these codes into three second-order aggregate themes, which are the three disruptions that form the backbone of our analysis.

Insert Figure 1 around here

Data analysis: Disrupting learning habits

In this section, we present data showing how students' bottom-up learning experiences during the field course triggered three main disruptions: intense sensory impressions and sensations, loss of predictability and control, and learning interdependency. The data show how these disruptions produce dissonance that triggers the experiential learning cycle, creating a learning space that enabled the resulting self-reported learning outcomes (Table in Appendix 1 offers additional illustrative quotes).

Intense sensory impressions and sensations

Students had to manage all situations that arose while experiencing intense *sensory impressions and sensations* that were more extreme than they were used to. These were especially evident in the students' accounts of the local market, which functioned for some students as a meeting place and data-gathering site during the field course. The market seems to have become a kind of symbol for students' sensations of chaos, physical overwhelm, anxiety and contingency, which constituted forms of dissonance for them during their stay in the EAC. They described it as very physically intense surrounded by dust and animals, but also told of a sense of achievement at having succeeded in organizing interviews despite these challenges:

Julia²: The first image I get actually is just being in the middle of the market and I just see all the stuff on the market and all the interactions with the people and also the students from EA-BS and just a situation where we are right in the middle and all the impressions and smells.

[...]

Interviewer: Ok, why do you think that impression really stuck so much?

² All names are pseudonyms.

Julia: ... It was so intense and it was so different from anything experienced before. It was really particular for this situation and also I think we had our biggest challenge, at least for the project, we tried to organize this focus group in the middle of the market and we were not, I mean, we believed that it would work but we really had no idea how when we were already right in the middle, but then it did. So, it was kind of the feeling of this challenge and also the success in the end which was quite extreme, I don't know, I think that's why it stuck.

(Excerpt, FGD 3)

Other students similarly described having to find strategies to cope with challenging work situations despite the heat and fatigue and where there was no guarantee that their efforts would bear fruit.

Sarah: The first day when we were paired together with our counterparts, we were all incredibly tired and it was hot. We were sitting together and I remember just feeling a little rushed because we had to get acquainted with them [...] It was my first impression... just because we had to figure out what to do quickly. (Excerpt, FGD 1)

Sensory disruptions were, however, also sometimes experienced as positive and exciting by some S-BS students, as in this account of feeling dissonance resulting from local students' more relaxed approach to touch and personal space:

Bastian: We were in the group and we went down to the local market in the city center. The two students they were both holding my hand when we walked down there... That is... It was weird in the beginning but then... [Laughing] I don't know. They just grabbed my hand and then we walked. To the market. I think that was a good experience. (Excerpt, FGD 1)

For another student, the experience of immersion in a radically different context constituted a multisensory learning experience characterized by immediacy, which prompted abstract conceptualization about his own limitations as well as reflection on others' lives:

Leo: You have the chance to really live an experience in a developing country and actually you can see, you can touch the life there and feel it. You can realize what you can do, and you can start to think about their way of life, you see, and it changes your mind probably. So I think also the other courses can help you, but not like this one (Excerpt, FGD 2)

As these quotes show, students had to open themselves to the “emotional and corporeal experience[s]” (Tomkins & Ulus, 2015, pp. 20–21) associated with these disruptions, and cope as well as they could if they were to perform successfully. Overall, the students expressed that the experience of having carried out research successfully in such a challenging environment had enhanced their awareness about other ways of living, and their confidence in their ability to cope with physically and emotionally trying situations.

Loss of predictability and control

Various aspects of the radically different context caused students to experience a loss of predictability and control. As Viswanathan et al. (2016) note, doing research in developing countries often implies dealing with a high level of unfamiliarity due to the different norms, cultures, language, institutional structures, resource configurations, power structures etc. of the new setting. The resulting complexity and uncertainty exacerbates the difficulty of gaining insights. The students participating in our field course described loss of control over their ability to *plan* their work effectively due to contingencies, difficulties getting around, different conceptions of time and their lack of knowledge about the context:

Johanna: It is quite hectic when you are going from place to place and things are unplanned or they are planned and they change... You have to make the most out of it while you are there.

Oliver: One that just came to mind is the difficulty of planning. Where to go, whom to interview, what kind of information can you expect from people, things just change in the matter of three minutes. And you could have planned for weeks, and it just... (Excerpt, FGD).

Students also faced unpredictability in interview situations, where informants interpreted terms and questions and rationalized things quite differently than they had expected, forcing them to rethink their questioning strategy:

Camilla: I don't know if I can make it concrete but sort of knowing we wanted to go in one direction with the research ...trying to put that aside and take part in the context that you're in and see what makes sense here and not having the conclusion in mind that we are aiming for, that was hard.

Interviewer: Where did you get those pre-conclusions from?

Camilla: Maybe from previous studies that we read? [...] Then I think also allowing new conclusions, like when we tried to be open-minded to what they said, in the short time we had then we did succeed to some extent to gain varying things that we wouldn't have expected, so we'd open up a bit.

Interviewer: So the part of asking the right questions were questions that were open enough and not steered by your pre-defined expectations or something?

Camilla: Yes.

Interviewer: And why was that easier to learn in the African context than here? I mean I'm guessing you've done interviewing of some kind also at S-BS before?

Camilla: I think being in a situation and asking the question and then the response you were expecting to get was different or they rationalize it in a different way that you wouldn't have thought about it.

Students realized that they could not presume that they shared a basic, common understanding with their informants, nor foresee which direction their research would take (e.g., based on expectations from the literature they had read), making them more conscious of the need to adapt to context and difference, and to open their minds and try alternative strategies. Students' initial setbacks seemed to prompt them to reflect and regroup, and ultimately to see "failures" as learning moments:

Julia: ... A lot of the knowledge I got was from failure, because we went in so many wrong ways and you can't even count but it was whatever we started we had to take half a step back again and say "Ok, so what is the next option?" and we went another step, half a step back again, the only big step by going half step forward and I think that really makes you experience and learn what is working and what is not working and then being in the end a little forced to reflect upon, it adds to what you learn and remember. (Excerpt, FGD 3)

The above examples show how students' assumptions were disrupted by concrete experiences that took them by surprise, producing dissonance (hectic feeling, things being "hard", failing) that forced them to *reflect* (on own prejudices, expectations), come up with more *abstract* understandings of their experiences (realizing the need to be flexible and open, that failure can constitute a learning opportunity) and *actively experiment* with alternative strategies (e.g., "opening up", "making the most of it", experimenting with different questioning strategies, putting aside pre-defined research goals, and taking risks). During this process, the students emerge from their immersion, and the "bottom-up" meets the "top-down" as they reflect upon their learning and compare and contrast what has been learned with previous knowledge, concepts, and insights (Viswanathan, 2016, p. 71).

Students explicitly compared the unpredictability, flexibility, and lack of control they experienced on the field course with their tendency to stick to a “recipe-like” approach to learning back home characterized by predictability, safety, deliberately constraining their impulse to innovate and include extracurricular material, and focusing predominantly on their grade:

Charlotte: ... no offence to academics but at one point you learn to disseminate your thousand pages of curriculum to what is important. You learn to go to your exams and do it well and how to do it and to produce a result. It is not a recipe but you learn how to do that process. There was no recipe for this trip, it was just a bit like here is the deep end, jump in and see if you can swim. [...]

Sune: I think just when you have a project at S-BS you just normally play it safe so you kind of know how to like write a project that will turn into a good grade.

Interviewer: How do you know that?

Sune: Like from the objectives and a lot of the curricula, I just mean if you have like a crazy idea you wouldn't elaborate on that because maybe that's not part of the curriculum and you read it somewhere else and you wouldn't put that in even though you thought “ok this is brilliant”.

Students described how their experiences with unpredictable situations had strengthened their confidence in their ability to carry out field studies, and demystified both their upcoming master thesis work, as well as the idea of working in developing countries in the future, giving them a sense that they had tools to cope and providing “tangible links to their future professional pathways” (Munge et al. 2018: 42):

Katrine: Even though it was different... some of the data collection methods were different than my thesis ... but still the confidence that you get when you have tried it... doing field studies once, and you know that you do a lot of research from back home but when you get to the field

everything is going to change anyways. And you are kind of prepared for that. So you don't... You just take one step at the time and see where you get and the same time you try to be as prepared as possible. And you know that it is not the end of the world if you have to take another direction of your research. I felt more prepared. Because of the field studies in EAC, I think.

Interviewer: So in fact, something about learning to cope with chaos and some of the things you were talking about as well?

Katrine: Yes, and learning to be flexible and trying to see the opportunities instead of the limits when you are in the field. (Excerpt, FGD 1)

Overall, the students expressed that the experience of having maneuvered successfully in an unpredictable environment had enhanced their self-confidence and ability to cope in a chaotic situation, to tolerate unpredictability, and to be flexible, adaptable, and patient.

Learning interdependency

A further recurrent theme was the S-BS students' realization that to complete their assignment successfully, they would have to rely on their EAC counterparts and leverage each other's respective differences. The students described how this interdependency had led them to reflect on the limits of their own abilities, and had been crucial to their ability to complete their assignment:

Camilla: I thought the mutual learning was really nice and I would use it, I'm sure, in the future that knowing each other's strengths and weaknesses and they [the EAC students] are definitely not good at writing reports and it would have been easier for them to evaluate in another way, but this really pushed them and pushed us also to accommodate their skills into doing this, so we had to step up.

Interviewer: Was there stuff that they could do that you weren't so good at?

Camilla: Yes, when we went to the field, and they gathered the women like they knew how to approach them when we did our focus group and we couldn't do anything other than looking cute and yea, we couldn't do much apart from smiling (Excerpt, FGD3)

As another student put it:

Oliver: It is completely out of my control and you got to go with what you have and got to rely on your local, in our case partners that we were doing the research with (Excerpt, FGD 1)

The dissonance (feeling out of control, disconcerted) arising from the need to accommodate, and rely on, the local students constituted a key learning moment for the S-BS students, who realized that they had to relinquish their habitual working approaches, compromise, and learn to value the diversity of points of view and work styles of their EAC peers:

I learnt to instead of disregarding different points of view, take advantage of them and enrich the process of doing research (Anonymous student in course evaluation in EAC 2013).

You cannot always get your way, but that is also good if it leads to a discussion. Different academic backgrounds and learning styles impact research to a great extent. It has definitely been challenging at times when frustration has taken over, but I believe I have learnt that different approaches all have their pros and cons. Working with non-Western students is very valuable, since the S-BS students came with prejudiced ideas about what EAC entrepreneurs are like. The EA-BS students helped us with expanding our view and taught us about the EAC way of life. (Anonymous student in course evaluation in EAC 2013).

Here, we see that students experienced disruptions to their ability to control the group work as they would have liked to, due to differences between their mode of working and that of their EAC counterparts, however they *reflect* on their own frustrations, conceptualize the problem in more *abstract* terms (such as cultural differences and benefits of different ways of working) and change

their perception and approach to the collaboration accordingly (*active experimentation*), for instance by becoming more open to learning from others.

Others remarked that the group work had disrupted their expectations due to the radically different environment and culture that they had to accommodate to:

I thought I was pretty used to it [group work] [...], but it is a completely different thing when you are not in your normal, safe surroundings. It took a lot of energy to try to "find" each other. Understand very different pronunciations, expressions, time, lives, habits, food. It was interesting and I've made some friends in the process, but if I was to work with East Africans again, I would definitely consider devoting much more time than 2½ weeks for it. Everything takes longer. Also, Europeans are much more outspoken and love to discuss. I missed that in the intercultural teamwork. (Anonymous student in written course evaluation in the EAC, 2013)

The S-BS students, who habitually spar quite uninhibitedly with another in group work back home, were frustrated by their EAC group mates' apparent reluctance to engage in a critical discussion, and had (unsuccessfully) tried to persuade them to emulate their forthright collaborative style. One student pointed out the communication challenges caused by differences in work styles, and explained how the Scandinavian students had to manage their tendency to try to steer the group process, at the same time realizing how much their East African counterparts brought to the table:

Communication is KEY, but challenging—lack of or miscommunication was frequent.

Differences in academic background were challenging. An experience to balance getting work done and not being "bossy". A great experience to see the EA-BS students in action in the field!! (Anonymous student in written course evaluation in the EAC 2013)

S-BS students' habitual group work approaches were disrupted by being confronted with their East African peers' different work approach, which produced dissonances in the form of frustration,

uncertainty and discomfort, but also admiration. This forced them to *reflect* on their assumptions about how to work efficiently and interact, how to accommodate to others, and how they might act differently in the future, as well as to actively *experiment* with new coping strategies, like this student who reported how s/he coped with negative emotions arising from cultural and academic differences:

Patience and tons of humor to not get frustrated by team members always being late or not showing up. Respecting differences in academic backgrounds, especially in terms of report writing (Anonymous student in course evaluation in the EAC, 2013).

It was a new experience for students to be compelled to work so intensely with, and depend on, students they didn't know, since at S-BS students are accustomed to choosing their own group mates, and often to working fairly autonomously even within their groups, reflecting Dunne & Martin's (2006: 514) remark that "We teach a very narrow form of collaboration, which is to find somebody who thinks like you and then work together." As noted by Lesnick (2017, p. 4), while there is growing acknowledgement of the value of international collaboration in education it is a challenge to implement such programs in a way "that respects differently positioned people and their histories as equally dignified and possessed of consequential knowledge". Experiential learning involving collaboration with people and communities in the Global South runs the risk of reinforcing assumptions about Western superiority and the "backwardness" and "neediness" of "developing countries" (Lesnick, 2017, p. 4). However, the interdependent collaboration approach built into our field course seems to have brought students to realize that their most basic assumptions—e.g., about time, or how to work together—were not universal or superior. Their reflections show a trajectory from frustration with their East African peers, followed by reflection leading to a relativization of their own perspective and attempts to adjust their own behavior. They seem to have overcome the tendency to say "Their reasoning process is different than mine;

therefore, it is wrong; therefore, I must stomp it out.” (Dunne & Martin, 2006, p. 514), reflecting what Boler (1999, pp. 176–77) calls a “collectivized engagement in learning to see differently”, as opposed to “individualized self-reflection” which she argues is a form of “spectating” and a “version of educational individualism”. Viswanathan’s (2012) study similarly shows how student teams that leverage students’ differences and complementarities (through interdisciplinarity, in this case, rather than mixed visiting and local student groups as in our study) contribute to achieving positive learning outcomes in challenging contexts.

Discussion

Gordon (2008, p. 771) remarks that “When teaching in the classroom about topics that defy familiar description, a large part of what is missing is direct, meaningful experience”. Our data show that by immersing students into an extreme and radically different learning context, while having to conduct a graded research assignment together with local students to a tight deadline, they experienced particular types of disruption, triggering dissonance which opened up for the experiential learning cycle of reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation with new approaches. This process combining top-down orchestration and bottom-up experiences, depicted in Figure 2, constituted a learning space conducive to acquiring the abilities needed to tackle unaccustomed, unpredictable and challenging contexts they will face in future work. The key contribution of our model lies in foregrounding the role of particular disruptions in producing dissonance that triggers the ELT cycle. We identify three specific *types* of disruption (intense sensory impressions and sensations, loss of predictability and control, and learning interdependency) that generated dissonance that prompted students to reflect, conceptualize and come up with new understandings and coping strategies. These disruptions constitute the starting point of the bottom-up learning process through which students acquire

insights from data instead of perceiving situations using their usual concepts (Viswanathan 2016). Although we identified three main distinct types of disruption, our data show that due to the immersive and collaborative course design, these were often experienced *simultaneously*, for instance in the marketplace interview situation where students experienced intense sensory impressions like heat, chaos and dust, unpredictability in planning as well as the need to rely on their local peers. Indeed, it may be the interplay between disruptions that enabled the reported learning outcomes, hence the importance of physical immersion in a challenging context facing a demanding task that must be solved collectively with unfamiliar local counterparts.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Our findings resonate with the observation of Viswanathan et al. (2011), that radically different contexts provide “a challenging learning ground in preparing students for the unique demands of the 21st century” (p. 568). Shrivastava et al. (2013) also write that students accustomed to addressing “neatly circumscribed problems” must be pushed outside their comfort zones and confronted with situations that are characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty, and which take them “beyond a cognitive understanding of the issues to physical/somatic, emotive, aesthetic, and even spiritual engagement” (p. 16). In that regard, Kolb and Kolb (2005) recommend that learning spaces should make room for feeling as well as thinking, as evidently occurred during our field course, but they also warn that “Negative emotions such as fear and anxiety can block learning” (p. 208). However, we found that such experiences—and failure—seemed just as essential to the students’ learning as the “positive” emotions experienced (see also Mega et al., 2014), as they prompted students to reflect and actively experiment with alternative strategies. In that regard, we concur with other scholars who question the notion that “negative” emotions must be cleared away in experiential

learning, viewing them instead as important sources of experiential knowledge (see also Jordi, 2011: 185; Michelson, 1998: 223; Tomkins & Ulus, 2015). Kofinas (2018) argues that experiences of the sublime, such as fear, anxiety and failure, “can shake emotionally individuals out of the triteness of everyday life and could be viewed as critical incidents in individuals’ lives”, supporting learning by compelling students to question their basic approaches and assumptions (p. 206). While students are known to experience a wide range of emotions in ordinary classroom settings, for instance in connection with exams and class attendance (Mega et al., 2014), these arguably cannot compare with the extreme, immersive and multisensory experience of a field course such as ours.

A few caveats are in order. First, the disruptions we identified may not be generalizable to the broader population of business students. The S-BS MSc study program is already quite geared towards problem-oriented work, which involves greater uncertainty than conventional academic assignments and “encourages the praxis of critical reflection and action” (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p. 305); much coursework and even exams are carried out in groups, so the students are quite accustomed to collaboration; they are also encouraged to go on internships and to do fieldwork in connection with other coursework. Business students from other learning environments might experience different disruptions (see also Caza & Brower, 2015) or more or less dissonance resulting from the same disruptions.

Second, Kolb and Kolb (2009, p. 48) emphasize that learning spaces, in addition to challenging students, “require norms of psychological safety, serious purpose and respect to promote learning”. Disruptions must therefore take place within a learning framework featuring sufficient structure and support so that students can reframe their experience to achieve a particular learning goal (see also Malkki & Green, 2014, p. 13) but which are not so disturbing that they become debilitatingly anxious or stressed (Kegan, 1994). In our experience, some students were more anxious, and required more support, than others, possibly affecting whether they experienced high- or low-

intensity dissonance in response to disruptions. A key factor enabling the students to cope with disruptions was the highly structured nature of the field course enabled by the top-down orchestration. Students noted the importance of having had sufficient “anchor points”, including a clear structure and guidelines for the field report assignment and group work, free access to their teachers, scheduled social activities, a week-by-week activities/tasks schedule, peer-peer dialogue with the other groups, and structured supervision sessions.

Third, neither the field course nor our interviews were planned with ELT in mind, so we did not carry out an a priori diagnosis of students’ learning styles or orientations that could have enabled us to correlate individual student responses with learning styles and orientation preferences.

Furthermore, the learning outcomes we identified were based on student self-reports. Future studies could test students’ approach to learning a priori (e.g., using the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI)) and learning styles (Learning Styles Inventory); conduct a before-after competence assessment; and explore whether prior exposure to radically different contexts affects the level (high or low) and type of dissonance students experience following particular types of disruption.

Fourth, researchers have suggested that encounters with “exotic others” during field courses may reinforce stereotypes, touristic voyeurism and othering rather than deep engagement with local culture (Nairn, 2005, p. 296; Doerr, 2017; Kellogg, 2014). “Real life” intercultural experiences can backfire, with real mutual exchange sometimes hard to achieve (Bathum & Whitaker, 2014). The data suggest, however, that our students engaged in critical self-reflection, felt intrinsic motivation and ownership, cared personally about the project process, questioned their own stereotypes, and engaged deeply with the local culture and people. We cannot predict with certainty how durable these learning outcomes will be, since stand-alone courses are often insufficient to change attitudes (Bodur, 2011), however our interviews were conducted several months post-return, and research on

the long-term impact of study abroad trips does show evidence of significant positive effects (De Graaf et al., 2013; Paige et al., 2009).

Finally, moving students out of their habitual classrooms is not necessarily a magic bullet. Field trips can be stressful (Robson, 2002), and may exclude resource-constrained students, those who lack prior experience, or who have pressing family or employment commitments (Ramakrishna, Sarkar & Vijayaraman, 2016); they can also involve substantial “temporal, financial and psychological costs” for faculty (Madden, McMillan and Madden, 2019, p. 185; Munge et al., 2018). Concerns about risk may also affect students’ and teachers’ willingness to participate (Herrick, 2010). Yet despite these issues, our study indicates that at least some learning spaces should be designed that immerse students in radically unfamiliar contexts, disabling their ability to confidently predict and control the learning environment, engaging their hearts and bodies as well as their heads, and compelling them to depend on others to solve a task and thereby acknowledge the limits of their own knowledge and abilities.

Conclusion

The article presents findings from an immersive, experiential learning-based field course that brings together students from a Scandinavian and East African business school, respectively. We report here on the experiences of the students from the Scandinavian school. The course is designed to mimic the messiness, uncertainty, collaborative challenges and extreme environments that business students wishing to work in the developing world are likely to meet in their future jobs, and need to be prepared for. We show how through a careful top-down orchestration that provided robust scaffolding for the students, bottom-up concrete learning experiences were enabled that produced specific types of disruption that led to dissonance that triggered the experiential learning cycle of reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. The resulting learning

space enabled students to practice coping with physically and emotionally challenging situations, to collaborate with, and rely on, others with very different preconditions, competences and world views from themselves, and to complete a task under pressure. The article offers a model that describes the disruptions and resulting dissonance, and conceptualises how the top-down and bottom-up elements of the course interplay in triggering the experiential learning cycle and desired learning outcomes.

Our model is not dependent on a distant location, and the types of disruption we suggest could be replicated closer to home. Students could, for instance, be required to carry out field-based project work with students they do not know or with whom they would not usually work, who possess a “local knowledge” advantage over them, and on whom they are compelled to rely in order to perform successfully—for instance in rural, low-income or ethnic minority areas which are culturally and socioeconomically unfamiliar to them, and which they cannot control or predict. As Dunne & Martin (2006, p. 515) put it, business schools should “help students have experiences that cause them to find other people useful”. Such environments should also involve unaccustomed and intense sensory impressions and sensations—e.g., crowds, scents, and chaos. Assignments might be designed with a focus on process rather than product so that students cannot rely on a “recipe” to get by: a pass/fail grade combined with formative assessment could support this, combined with critical incident reporting in journals or portfolios (see e.g., Biggs, 2011), followed by a dialogue-based oral examination.

Future research could further probe the nature of the North–South student collaboration. Although the course was initiated by the S-BS, it depends on close collaboration between the S-BS and EA-BS, such that both student groups’ experiences and learning are, in principle, relational, inter-subjective and co-produced. That notwithstanding, the power and knowledge balance (including access to literature) may re/produce power inequalities and influence course outcomes,

with a “dominating global North” and a “deficit global South” (White 2020: 485) that is perceived by Northern students as needing to be “developed” (Lesnick 2017). Here, focus group interviews with the EA-BS students could shed light on their own reflections, allow for comparison with the S-BS students’ experiences and maybe suggest a different or parallel model when assessing the learning outcomes of the EA-BS students.

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