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Decolonizing Development: Practical Applications for the Classroom and the Field

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DECOLONIZING DEVELOPMENT

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS
FOR THE CLASSROOM AND
THE FIELD



REGIS  **UNIVERSITY**
MASTER OF DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Authors: Emily Van Houweling and Nina Miller

Handbook of Decolonizing Practices: From the Classroom to the Field

Authors' note

Both of us (Nina and Emily) left the Regis University MDP in July of 2024. At that point, the Regis MDP was intertwined with the Master of Nonprofit Management and rebranded as the Master of Sustainable Development Practice. For a variety of reasons, decolonization is no longer core to the program. One way we hope to continue the legacy of the MDP is to freely share the practices we developed with anyone interested in the project of decolonizing development. We hope readers of this handbook will continue to move this important work forward in their respective spheres of endeavor and influence.

Acknowledgements

This handbook is the result of a four-year collaboration among faculty, students and alumni in the Regis MDP program (2020-2024). It has also been enriched by the contributions of the participants of a conference we organized in Meru, Kenya called the Kenya Conference for Decolonizing Development (KCDD): Chelsea Nicole Bannatyne, Fanan Biem, Edulfo Ivan Rodriguez Briones, Mohammed Crossman-Serb, Paola Cecilia Rodriguez Cuevas, Jude Fokwang, Joie Ha, Kanekwa Kachinga, Margaret Elizabeth Larson, Mary Joy Le, Kennedy Okello Miruka, Billy Musoke, Sereverien Ngarukiye, Arnaud Michel Nibaruta, Precious Nkoka, Vivian Ijeoma Okwor, Rattana Rode, Mayara Aguiar Rosa, Jonathan Santos, Jordyn Strege and Kiandra Faylicia Quinn. We are grateful for the feedback from our advisory council; thanks to Mayara Aguiar Rosa, Monica Labiche Brown, A. Scott Dupree, Jude Fokwang, Sophia Friedson-Ridenour, Michael Lerma, Liberty Wickman, Dave Wilsey and Cristin Jensen Lasser. A few individuals whose perspectives and voices shine through in this document should be highlighted: Dr. Karambu Ringera, who was a thought partner and host of the KCDD; A. Scott DuPree, who helped develop our pedagogy; and Sophia Friedson-Ridenour, who initially steered us to Spencer and provided feedback to us at various stages. Carolyn Tarr and Rebel Spirit Media led the development of decolonized storytelling for digital media.

List of Acronyms

KCDD - Kenya Convening on Decolonizing Development

MDP-Master of Development Practice

SDGs-United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

UNESCO – United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization

We recommend the reader start with the introduction to the handbook and then skip to the pedagogies and/or learning objectives that are most relevant to your work. We have made ample use of internal hyperlinks to connect topics and themes of interest. The handbook has multiple entry points and is not intended to be read as a monograph.

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1. Introduction

This handbook captures the learnings of nearly eight years of committed effort to undo the colonial assumptions that define so much of international development by fulfilling the radical transformative potential of education. After continuous experimentation and refinement in the classroom, and with the active participation of our students and alumni, as well as the generous material support of The Spencer Foundation, we are eager to pass on this collection of pedagogies, learning objectives, principles, resources and activities to the like-minded teachers, practitioners and activists who share our passion for the possibilities of education to move the world toward justice and thriving.

We build on the original insight of the McArthur Foundation, which in 2008 put forth the proposition that the failures of international development stemmed from the technocratic mindset of a Global North fixated on isolated “solutions,” ripped from their historical and social contexts, and delivered from the laboratories of the rich world to “needy” communities in the poor world. The remedy proposed by McArthur was to home in on the development practitioner and their foundational training. They proposed a different kind of education for practitioners, one that broke disciplinary silos to let students trade narrow specialization for the holism afforded by an integrated and practice-oriented approach. This epistemological breakthrough produced the Master of Development Practice degree, now taught in 35 universities worldwide, 11 of them in North America, including our program at Regis University in Denver, Colorado.

Our Regis MDP is among the 35, but with its own critical difference. Since our founding in 2015, we have gone beyond the content of our teaching to think intentionally about how we teach and who is in the room. Our program is distinguished by its real-time online classroom and its cohorts, comprised of working practitioners, half of whom connect in real-time classes from their home communities in the Global South. The continuous dialectic this situation enables – between classroom and field and between global North and South – has made for a unique environment within which to develop a decolonizing pedagogy. Rather than merely disseminating critical content from professor to student, we have had the luxury of a significantly decentered classroom where students and faculty can co-create development knowledge through the shared realities of their diverse contexts. Our focus over the past eight years has been the development of a pedagogy to unlock that rich potential.

Why decolonization?

Readers from the academic and development sectors will recognize “decolonization” - the key term of this guide – as common parlance, as even an over-used buzzword. For their part, community organizers, primary and secondary teachers, and leaders of community-based organizations may be encountering the word for the first time. While there is much to decipher and the stakes of interpretation are arguably high, we start from the facts of our collective

history, which for at least 500 years has been framed by colonialism: the settlement and resource extraction from the majority of the world's peoples and lands by European powers. That extraction has importantly included the kidnapping and enslavement of human beings as a "resource" within commodity capitalism and the promotion of racism to justify this plunder. The resulting imbalance of wealth in the Global North and poverty in the Global South defines our current reality, even decades after the independence of the former colonies and the establishment of indigenous rights within settler countries like the United States and Canada. The cultures, economies and institutions we all inhabit are necessarily colonial in their assumptions and structures since they were built – and built up – in the colonial world, in service of its perpetuation. Mainstream development continues to operate by the colonial logic of the (white) Western expert seeking to help or improve people in the Global South, who are largely seen as passive and deficient.

"Decolonization," then, is the project of critically understanding our received world through this historical lens and working to realign our institutions, relationships and identities along lines of equity and common thriving. Decolonization is a process of continually asking how we got here and how we can build a fairer and more just world.

Decolonization in our MDP program

Decolonization has provided our MDP with a comprehensive framework for thinking about admissions, hiring, curriculum, pedagogy, and our relationship with the larger university. We acknowledge there are many frustrating ways that the business-oriented and, at the same time, financially strained university system constrains this work (Kapoor 2023, Mbembe 2016). Here, however, we focus on what is possible in the classroom as a space deliberately set apart for the purpose of human development and epistemological interrogation. At least in its ideal form! Keeping to this ideal has been our task and discipline.

An education grant from the Spencer Foundation enabled us to devote significant resources towards our goal of decolonizing the classroom. The grant specifically focused on developing, assessing and articulating decolonizing pedagogies for our MDP program as a practical contribution to interested educators everywhere. While there has been a lot of buzz about decolonizing the university, there are few resources for teachers who want to do this in a practical way in their classrooms. Furthermore, it is hard to know the impact of these decolonizing pedagogies. The results of this research are shared here, first organized around our five key pedagogies, and then the 10 learning objectives we used to assess our approach. Readers curious about our assessment process may read about it in section 4.

Our approach to decolonization in our MDP program has been influenced by the theory and practices of Paulo Freire and bell hooks. Like these activist scholars, we emphasize active learning, critical thinking, deep reflexivity, attention to power dynamics and praxis approaches in our classroom. Our pedagogy aims to challenge coloniality—the "long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Within

international development these patterns include (racialized) ideas about who is the expert and who is the recipient of aid; normative equivalences between morality, modernization and Christianity; and patterns of extraction, violence and control over labor and resources. In building our MDP program, we have been doing our best to “confront development studies to imagine something different” (Kapoor 2023). The passion of our students working in their own communities to improve the lives of people has motivated our effort to provide an approach that helps them learn how to do this as ethically, inclusively, and effectively as possible, to build from the given world and at the same time, to support their very real need for employment in the sector. We choose this approach over that of, for example, Murray and Daly (2023) or Rutazibwa (2018), who advocate for dismissing the discipline altogether. An important determinant of our “reformist” approach is our respect for the needs of our Global South students, not only to find reasonable livelihood and professional success, but to move into the leadership roles that historically go to expatriate practitioners from the US and Europe. Equipping Global South practitioners with the highly practical and transdisciplinary training of our curriculum – not to mention the credential of a Master’s degree – is integral to our larger effort to decolonize development.

In this, we are inspired by the challenge of The Spencer Foundation to reimagine education outside conventional institutional boundaries.¹ At the global level, we also look to UNESCO – the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization – who have put forth a “learning objectives framework” intended for use in any learning space at any level of human development. Its particular purpose is fostering universal adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs). While the trajectory of the SDGs is arguably “colonial” in its neoliberal insistence on economic growth, from a pedagogical perspective, adoption of the SDGs shares the challenges of decolonizing pedagogy in its transdisciplinary scope and transformative ambition. With that in mind, we note that the UNESCO SDG Learning Objectives Framework includes *social-emotional* and *behavioral* learning objectives along with the *cognitive*. This is a matter for celebration. Truly, the only way that education will have the impact the world so desperately needs is if it aims at transforming – not merely informing – learners. Happily for this effort, the pedagogies in this handbook go well beyond those laid out in the UNESCO framework. Based on years-long learning in our diverse online classroom, these pedagogies are keyed to unlocking the dynamics and possibilities of an intentional educational space, where diversity is not something to be managed but rather, mined as a resource (with apologies for the extractivist metaphor) for our collective thriving.

¹ From the current RFP: We recognize that learning occurs across the life course as well as across settings—from the classroom to the workplace, to family and community contexts and even onto the playing field—any of which may, in the right circumstance, provide the basis for rewarding study that makes significant contributions to the field. We value work that fosters creative and open-minded scholarship, engages in deep inquiry, and examines robust questions related to education. To this end, this program supports proposals from multiple disciplinary and methodological perspectives, both domestically and internationally, from scholars at various stages in their career. We anticipate that proposals will span a wide range of topics and disciplines that innovatively investigate questions central to education, including for example education, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, law, economics, history, or neuroscience, amongst others. [Research Grants on Education: Large | The Spencer Foundation](#)

Using this guide

We hope the readers of this guide will include not only university international or global development programs, but also any organizations or programs concerned with understanding and addressing the power dynamics and fraught histories of community development. Whether you are conducting community workshops, leading community-based research, organizing for community change, facilitating study abroad programs, conducting DEI trainings, or funding large development programs, we believe there is something here for you. We have designed the handbook with different entry points. It is therefore NOT intended to be read as a monograph, but rather, to be navigated via the internal and external links provided, based on the reader's particular interests.

One entry point might be to identify which pedagogies or learning objectives your organization wants to work on. This might be because they are especially relevant to your mission, or because they are areas in which you are currently not as strong as you might like to be. Our assessment process, outlined in section 4, contains a process for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of your program according to the decolonized learning objectives.

In terms of organization, each pedagogy and learning objective is briefly described and then followed by a set of applications and challenges. These applications might be tools, principles or concepts, discussion topics, activities, case studies, resources or strategies. These are all coded, and the codes are defined in Table 1, below. We have included internal hyperlinks to connect learning objectives and pedagogies and to illustrate the bridging potential of many applications. The applications are not full-blown lesson or activity plans; they are intended to provide just enough guidance and background that readers can adapt and develop them to their own contexts and purposes. There is however, an appendix with one fully articulated assignment; ideally, this is something we would build on in the future - ideally, with contributions from like-minded readers.

Table: Icons representing applications of pedagogies and learning objectives.

 <p>Tool</p>	 <p>Case study</p>
 <p>Principle or concept</p>	 <p>Resource</p>
 <p>Discussion topic</p>	 <p>Strategy</p>
 <p>Activity or Assignment</p>	

Group norms as scaffolding for decolonization

The educational space of the decolonizing classroom is defined by committed striving toward utopian aspiration. As such, it is a place that invites our best selves – our full game of critical thinking, vulnerability, deep listening, and empathic imagination. Needless to say, this is a self we pull out of the totality of our flawed humanity; we are not always and only critically-thoughtful, vulnerable and empathic. That said, in the decolonizing classroom, we lead with those qualities and we honor them in each other. How does this happen? By establishing our common intent and the norms that support them, framed by the continuity of relationship and time commitment that allows for trust, refined by targeted research and deep reflexivity, we work towards these goals in dialectical fashion. This is essentially the technology of our pedagogy. Hard experience has taught us that the aims of decolonizing development education are inextricable from the educational ethos that contains them. As such, we caution strongly against the impulse to use the materials of this handbook in too episodic a way, to resist the impulse to treat these materials as occasional “enrichments” of an otherwise intact status quo. That said, every learning context is particular and our genuine hope is to contribute to the movement for more – and more diverse and equitable – educational spaces. One size, then, will not fit all.

We encourage readers to consider what – in your context – will constitute sufficient trust and continuity for collective risk-taking, and then to invest the time and participation to establish

and nurture those essentials as an ongoing – even daily - commitment. Establishing group norms at the start of a class or work with a community is a necessary foundation to preventing potential conflict or misunderstanding, and ensuring everyone knows what is expected of them. In our program, we collectively brainstorm these norms so as to model the process and ensure there is buy-in by the group. As a variation, we will sometimes start with a list of norms that have worked well in the past. From there we can add or edit as the group sees fit.

This handbook is not meant to be prescriptive, but to open up ideas, particularly those that cross boundaries between disciplines and between theory and practice. In some cases, we offer specific development practice examples of using the pedagogies and learning objectives, but most of the material is focused on the classroom. We trust that with some imagination the reader will determine how to translate and adapt these to their own context. We have found that this process of adaptation in the rich praxis field yields significant creativity and innovation.

A note on resources: This handbook is not at all intended to be comprehensive of all the resources out there for each learning objective or pedagogy; it more modestly focuses on material and activities that we have used in our classroom. We also include case studies and tools that students and alumni have shared from their own development practice.

Academic norms

Administrative norms and academic codes of conduct can get in the way of creating a shared culture and allowing people to fully express themselves and the range of their knowledge and experience. Many international students entering our program come with different understandings of the roles of instructors and students, expectations about participation, and norms for academic writing. From our first classes, we prioritize academic support of students and emphasize the role of the professor as facilitator, acknowledging that this approach will be a new norm for many of our students. That said, our core strategy for ensuring the quality of our students' experience is to be highly self-reflective about how we teach. The appendix in section 6 details several specific strategies along these lines.

The Collective Context for This Work

We write this handbook in solidarity with our many faculty members, collaborators, alumni and students who have pushed us and informed this work. The big “we” used so often in this text refers to this larger group. The smaller “we” refers to the two primary authors of this text: Emily Van Houweling and Nina Miller. As white women living in a high-income country, we start from a place of humility, solidarity and tremendous responsibility to push the political project of decolonization as far as possible and to support decolonial options. We work to recognize our gaps and blind spots and have tried to move towards a collective aspiration for the decolonization project. We have relied on the wisdom of our local partners and a diverse

advisory council to guide this handbook. Our pedagogies have developed through classroom experimentation, collective reflection, class discussions, and student and alumni assessments.

In 2024, we organized and facilitated the [Kenya Conference for Decolonizing Development \(KCDD\)](#), a week-long learning exchange in Meru, Kenya. This was intended to be a culminating collective activity for the Spencer grant, bringing together students and alumni from our MDP as well as three other MDPs that prioritized decolonization (Emory University, Trinity College Dublin and the University of Winnipeg). Participants were competitively selected based on how they have personally and professionally engaged in decolonization efforts and what they could contribute to the group.

The conference featured a dynamic mix of guest speakers, collaborative work groups, structured dialogues, participatory activities and field trips related to decolonizing development. The sessions were shaped and facilitated by the diverse participants, who represented ten countries and entities from the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, to foundations, social enterprises, and grassroots organizations. Staying true to our MDP pedagogy, we emphasized the co-production of knowledge, full-person learning, creative and arts-based approaches, and reflexivity throughout the process. The conference was loosely organized around our ten learning objectives, and driven by our collective knowledge, experience and passion. Having this shared space and significant time together led to deep discussions and rich learning and helped bridge the MDP classroom learnings with development practice. Several of the activities and case studies included in this handbook come out of the KCDD.

Faculty training

The work of decolonizing education can too easily fall into cookie-cutter protocols and become tokenistic; it can also be hard work for educators who have long-established ways of going about the always-demanding work of teaching. One of the biggest challenges in this decolonizing project is to find faculty who are willing to learn new pedagogies, and have the time to make this commitment possible. We are cognizant of the increasing demands placed on faculty, and the low remuneration for work, especially for affiliate faculty, who make up a large percentage of our teachers. In building a truly committed and creative instructional team, we cannot ignore these challenges.

In our program it has worked well to host an annual faculty workshop (compensated with a stipend and meals, however modest) in which we focus on a specific entry point into the decolonizing work, and then give faculty time and structured space to find their own way to adapting the decolonized pedagogies and learning objectives to their particular courses and disciplines. We strive to set up a creative and collaborative learning environment where faculty can share their classroom challenges and learn from each other - in the same way we create this space for students. Our faculty value this learning community as a chance to bridge their development experience and classroom pedagogy, and to continue to advance their own sense of how decolonization might serve to open up their fields and their teaching. We provide

faculty with support for integrating our decolonizing pedagogies and learning objectives, but give them the creative freedom to do this in their own way, recognizing that each discipline and topic might call for a different approach. We ask faculty to consider which of the LOs most naturally aligns with their current content and assignments and how they might lean into that potential. For our curriculum assessment, we map the LOs across our curriculum, noting sequencing and gaps, and we work as a team to make the adjustments that would contribute to a coherent experience for the students. (See more on this in Section 4: Assessment).



Activity: The Origin Story of Your Discipline

As a foundational exercise designed to unleash every faculty member's decolonizing efforts consistent with their own discipline, we invite them to examine the origin story of their particular discipline, with the following, laddered, prompts:

1. How are larger power dynamics surrounding race, sex, gender, language, nationality and class part of the origin story of your discipline? How do these power dynamics manifest themselves today? Consider how they might show up in the central voices, values, theories, narratives, assumptions and relationships in your discipline.
2. What are the alternatives to the mainstream perspectives in your discipline? What voices, values, narratives, theories, assumptions have been hidden/silenced by the discipline's dominant power dynamics?
3. How might you include these alternative perspectives in your classes? How might their inclusion open up the discipline itself?

We then suggest the following in-class activity:

Present the origin story of the discipline when you are first introducing the course, preferably using one slide. Have students work in small groups to answer the following questions:

- Whose perspective does this story center?
- What does the story value?
- What does it de-value?
- Who and what is excluded?
- What might change with their inclusion?
- How do you think the power dynamics embedded in this story continue today?

These and other faculty trainings happened through our annual and semi-annual workshops, which – by their own testimony – contributed significantly to a sense of community, possibility and excitement amongst the faculty.

2. Pedagogies

The ways in which knowledge and learning are approached are key to addressing how colonial practices have influenced development practice. Knowledge has tended to come from a few universities and powerful institutions, whose paradigms and precepts the student must accept in order to advance – even when those contradict the realities of their own experience. Students have been expected to listen to and take in the wisdom of the teacher, following the “banking approach” much criticized by Paulo Freire. In this context, the central challenge of pedagogy is to stimulate a creative space in which students can bring and critically (and practically) engage with diverse types of knowledge and multiple ways of knowing.

Embracing this challenge over a decade, we gradually evolved and found the following five pedagogies to be foundational for decolonizing our classroom dynamics.

1. Building Community
2. Practicing the critical thinking-reflection-action cycle
3. Decentering western voices and epistemologies
4. Whole person learning
5. Horizontal learning and co-creation

These pedagogies not only support deeper, more inclusive, and more holistic learning, but also model specific methods and tools that can be translated to development practice itself, where so much depends upon human learning and transformation.

PD1: Building community

We see a strongly connected and interdependent learning community as key to decolonizing the classroom. The learning community grows from explicitly shared classroom values and norms that set up a safe space for discussion and support trust and respect within our classes. It enables deep and critical dialogue and the willingness to see from different points of view.

Community is the antidote to education that is competitive, dehumanizing, and shaming, leading people away from their selves and community. Community doesn't presume sameness or even harmony but rather, allows people to challenge each other without the diminishment of anyone's spirit (bell hooks 2003). In our program we devote considerable time to building the learning community, beginning at program orientation and continuing across every class.

Dialogue is the critical glue of community as well as the active building material for genuine mutual understanding. As such we see it as a relational process of learning from and with others, rather than learning about “Others” from the distance of abstract expertise. Our community-building necessarily involves getting to know each other as people such that conflict may be buffered enough to serve as an opening into further productive dialogue. If we know each other’s stories, we can engage with empathy and trust in our mutual growth. In their evaluation surveys, students have said that small group discussions, peer review, and group projects were the activities that were most conducive to building community. On the practitioner side, building trust and relationships with communities and organizations is a foundational skill and our classroom serves to model it.

APPLICATIONS

An important tenet of our decolonizing work is that every gathering, whether in-person or virtual, is an opportunity to build community. Conversely, not treating it as such undermines the social contract we have with students, which states that we owe each other our full presence - and that practicing full presence is important preparation for working with communities. As a result, we approach every convening with intentionality.

Base Camp

Our MDP sets aside around five hours over two days for students to get oriented to the program and each other. Most of this time is dedicated to explicit discussion and building of the learning community, with students sharing personal and cultural stories and building a sense of shared value - which includes valuing the learning community itself, along with basic norms of development practice, like equity and accountability.

Classroom Cohort Model

We have intentionally created a curriculum where students move together through their classes as a cohort. This builds up trust and students get to know each other deeply by the end of the program.

Full Presence

One key to building a community is ensuring that everyone is equally engaged and present. We encourage this through a participation rubric we created specifically for the real-time Zoom classroom that includes everyone showing up on time, having their camera on and a headset to facilitate clear audio. If a student is not able to keep their camera on or needs to briefly step away from their computer, they inform the class via chat to build accountability in the group.

Small group discussions

We include small breakout groups (three to five students) in nearly every class to give students time to critically and collectively reflect on and apply the class topics. The small groups challenge students to process the central content of a class, go deeper into the readings,

answer key questions, solve problems and apply the tools they are learning. These groups allow students to take ownership of the conversation and help build community. In the spaces between the focused conversation students are able to chat informally with their peers, support each other and get help with class assignments. Importantly, small groups also expand the space of the classroom to include the particular stories and experiences of every member of the class – impossible to achieve within the time constraints of the all-group format.

“Get to know you” activities

Quick Activity Prompts:

- Show and tell the story of an object from your world
- Describe your favorite snack
- Tell us about a hobby of yours
- Share something about you we don't know yet
- Tell us a proverb from your country
- Share a saying in your language (and teach us to say it)
- Describe your journey to work/school
- Show us a greeting that is common in your community
- What is your spirit animal?
- Where do you feel most connected to nature: forest, mountain or water?
- What's your favorite weather for sleeping?
- Sense of Place. As a start to class, have a few people describe the space they are in, literally – where they are, what's around them, how the light is, what they can hear, what the vibe is, etc.

Added bonus for weaving this activity into the day's content topic: responses to these prompts can be shared in pairs, small groups, full groups or in chat. In full groups we often have students “pass the baton” and call on the next student to share, requiring them to stay attuned to the room; who is in it and who has spoken throughout the exercise.

“Mingle, Mingle”

Participants walk around a room to the rhythm of “Mingle, Mingle”, called out by the facilitator. At random intervals, the facilitator claps twice and calls out “Groups of 2 [or 3, or 4, etc] along with a prompt, whereupon people need to quickly form those groups and discuss accordingly. Prompts can be anything from something you appreciate about the other person(s), to your favorite time of year and why. Random groups and movement are a quick way to tap into the energy and trust-building potential of low-stakes discussions.

The Story of My Name

A longer activity that takes at least 30 minutes is The Story of My Name, wherein students tell the story of their name to a partner, who then retells their partner's story to the group. This activity not only helps students learn about each other, but also fosters listening and the sense

of mutual responsibility for each other. Listening and mutual responsibility contribute to an ethic of care that cuts against domination and competitiveness in the classroom (and development).

“I Think,” “I Feel,” “I Wonder”

We often use this activity as a check-in to gauge where everyone in the group is at. We ask everyone to respond one by one or in chat to one of the following prompts: “I think” or “I feel” or “I wonder”. The prompts provide students a bit of structure and a chance to share what is on their mind following the explanation of something complex or challenging. This also works well at the start of class as a gauge of where students might be with regard to the assigned reading.

TIPS (Thing, Idea, Person or Self)

For this exercise students write a letter – a communication to a person, thing, idea – or to themselves – following their experience with a specific activity. These writing responses are timed for less than 5 minutes to encourage people just to write what first comes into their minds. Following the writing, students share their responses or choose another perspective to write from for additional time. We have used this activity to reflect after a new experience or difficult classroom topic or discussion. It encourages people to ground themselves creatively and empathetically within a different point of view. Students opt for a wide variety of possibilities: a squat toilet, an indigenous elder, a backyard tree, a fisherman, a dilapidated health clinic, and their future self. We learned about this activity from Anu Taruwath, who uses it in her study abroad program at the University of Washington (the full resource is [here](#)).

Whatsapp

We encourage students to start a Whatsapp group with their cohort. These are active groups where students support each other, ask questions and share personal information. WhatsApp has the advantage of being nearly universally available at low bandwidth and accordingly, is familiar to students everywhere. It is also able to transmit files and create group chats, so students can follow pretty much wherever their discussion takes them. Whatsapp can be particularly helpful in staying in touch after a class or project has ended. Faculty are typically not part of these groups.

Tell Me a Story About That

When a classroom discussion has surfaced a conflict of ideology or value, the conventional response is either to argue the point on abstract grounds – to get to a “correct” conclusion - or back away from the implication of conflict, thereby burying what could be a productive point of difference. Our approach has been to go deeper on empathy and curiosity: we ask the student whose views differ from what would be considered normative development values (LGBTQAI+ rights are a perennial example) to “tell me/us a story about that.” The student is invited to provide personal and cultural context that illuminates their position. Their story, meantime,

adds dimensionality to the collective understanding of them as a person and gives the other students more ways to engage them and move the conversation forward. Minds are not necessarily changed in that moment on the point of value (though they may well do so over time) but the community has built out their mutual understanding and trust, and expanded their range of understanding of possible human perspectives on any given issue.

Faculty community

Our MDP program relies on more than 20 affiliates to teach classes, which can make it difficult to have a cohesive teaching pedagogy and mission. Keeping faculty engaged and motivated requires a strong faculty community and common culture. Just as with the classroom itself, faculty culture requires investments of time and space. We do this through several mechanisms including team teaching, providing ongoing in-class pedagogical and technical support (particularly for affiliates new to teaching, or new to our classroom), offering regular in-class observation and coaching, sharing our protocols research and best practices in a faculty guidebook, hosting annual workshops, offering trainings in new topics (such as applied theater), and facilitating reading groups.

Building trust within your organization. Author: Jordyn Strege (Regis MDP alumna)

In development we often focus on building trust externally with stakeholders while overlooking the importance of first building trust internally within our own organization or group. When people do not feel comfortable, safe, and respected in their workplace, this will show through in their work, and staff will be more likely to leave. However, strong group cohesion, where everyone feels they can bring their full self into their work, can lead to more innovation, stability, and effectiveness in development work. Based on Jordyn's experience, she developed the following list of key areas that are important for building trust within teams, departments and organizations. These "ingredients" are often discussed in development, yet, rarely applied internally at the institutional level.

Take away: "Just as it is important to get to know a community, it's equally important for teams to get to know one another and build relationships."- Jordyn

<p>Conflict resolution:</p> <p>Team readings: Read books together on conflict resolution.</p> <p>Working Genius Assessment: This assessment has been helpful to mitigate interdepartmental conflict and give vocabulary to team members' skills/ work style preferences.</p>	<p>Emotional Intelligence/ Trauma awareness:</p> <p>In this sector of work, it's important to be aware that certain stories or events could trigger trauma for a team member and to protect your team, to the extent possible, from having to engage in ways that may bring up past trauma.</p> <p>Extend mental health resources: Offer team members the option to meet with trained mental health practitioners who have experience working in similar contexts to where we work/ our partners work.</p>
<p>Cultural awareness:</p> <p>Cultural Intelligence Center assessment</p> <p>This assessment is taken individually and discussed together.</p>	<p>Time and Space:</p> <p>It's important to intentionally create safe and accountable space to get the most out of the tools and topics above. This takes time and commitment from senior leadership. Investment in building this space is key.</p>

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Invisible power dynamics

Unspoken, less visible power dynamics, such as those based on nationality, geopolitical relations, sexuality, religious affiliation, age or social status can affect the way students treat each other and may not be visible to the professor, especially within an international diverse classroom. Activities such as using the [diversity wheel exercise](#) or discussing identity in small groups guided by questions such as: "What is one thing you wish people knew about you that isn't immediately obvious when they see you?" may be helpful foundational activities.

Unequal participation

This is often an issue in groups, especially groups that work across cultural, linguistic, and geographic boundaries. Setting norms for participation and skilled facilitation help. Some facilitation ideas that are useful are: creating space for silence, asking those who have not yet spoken to speak, asking everyone to allow three (or more if a larger group) to speak before they

contribute again (“3 before me”), using a timer to make sure everyone has an equal time to speak, and giving people time to write down their thoughts before the start of discussion. Small groups can also help to provide opportunities for quiet students to express themselves and lead discussions. Similarly, the online classroom can make use of the chat to aggregate thoughts from all the students, with the instructor then asking a few individuals to elaborate verbally, in real time.

PD2: Practicing the critical thinking-reflection-action cycle

Across the development field the resource of critical thinking has often been subsumed to the imperative to deliver immediate concrete benefits; as such, development dialogue often fails to penetrate to the bigger questions beneath logistical concerns, resulting in projects that are ill-suited to the communities for which they are intended. Real examples abound, such as the building of an indoor kitchen at a school where the cooks all prefer to cook outside (and, thus, use the state-of-the-art kitchen for an expensive storeroom). In fact, development workers need critical thinking skills if they are to meaningfully identify and participate in the communities’ planning and thinking processes.

The students in our program, who are typically mid-career practitioners and working full time, are well positioned to apply what they learn in the classroom – and then bring the results back to the classroom. This quick feedback loop keeps classes grounded and facilitates the cycle of reflection–critical thinking–action that Freire (1970) advocates. Every class aims to leave the students with practical tools and approaches that they can use in their own work. At the same time, we adopt a critical and reflective perspective when we present new theories, tools or projects and create space for collective dialog and personal reflection to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of these ideas. We encourage and operationalize self-reflection as an essential practice for our students in their professional lives. Through assignments and discussion, all students are engaged in an internal process of acknowledging and unlearning complicity in systems of privilege (Kapoor, 2004; Alasuutari, 2010), asking key questions, such as: What roles should a development worker play? What assumptions and preconceptions do I bring with me into my practice? How does my own identity and privilege shape interactions I have in the development field? This type of critical reflexivity is necessarily uncomfortable at times, but crucially serves to open up space for alternative approaches to development and continuous professional growth. We have seen that modeling this critical thinking in the classroom by building it into discussions and assignments provides students with tools for such critique and resistance in their own work and lives.

APPLICATIONS

In practice, all of our faculty members focus on various aspects of the critical thinking cycle, building on our students’ engagement in development projects. Students are invited to

develop their own approaches, try them out and then use the critical tools of their classes to identify where they have success and where they fall short. This productively blurs the lines between practice and academic study. This critical thinking cycle is emphasized in the Capstone and Leadership classes (described in this handbook), and is also prominent in applied group projects, gender and social inclusion analysis, participatory tool application and reflection, and decolonizing our own/development storytelling.

Applied Group Projects

Several classes structure final group projects around actual development projects in partnership with NGOs or local development efforts. For examples of applied group projects we have used in class see: [Institutional Partnerships](#), [Community-Based Research Class](#), [Collaborative Professional Consultancy](#).

Capstone

The MDP capstone invites students to apply the knowledge, theory and skills they have gained to a fully developed proposal for a new project or program to which they feel strong personal commitment and passion. This is a year-long process whereby students are matched with an advisor and have the opportunity to put their academic learning and personal experience into practice by developing a literature review, stakeholder analysis, needs assessment, theory of change, and implementation plan for a project they could - and in many cases, actually do - build.

Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis

There are many frameworks within which to analyze power dynamics at the community level and many organizations create their own to help focus their priorities. We have found the [Transforming Agency, Access and Power Toolkit \(TAAP\)](#), available online, to provide a clear framework for gender and social inclusion analysis with practical tools and applications. Students use the TAAP toolkit to do a gender and social inclusion analysis of a project that they have worked on, are currently working on, or hope to work on in the future. After briefly describing the background for their program and the purpose for their analysis, students design a framework for analysis that begins with the six domains outlined in TAAP (1. Laws, Policies, Regulations, and Institutional Practices; 2. Access to and Control over Assets and Resources; 3. Knowledge, Beliefs and Perceptions, Cultural Norms; 4. Power and Decision-making; 5. Roles, Responsibilities, Participation and Time Use; and 6. Human Dignity, Safety and Wellness), although they are welcome to modify this framework to better fit their project. Students are tasked to include a description of how each category is relevant to their project and what specific aspects of it they would want to look at. In addition, they write 3-5 exploratory questions for each category that are specific to their project. They do not need to answer these questions! The greater pedagogical value is in simply framing them.

Participatory Tool Application and Reflection

Students each choose a tool (such as SWOT analysis, World Cafe, Social Network analysis, Photovoice, community mapping, etc) to research in-depth and take responsibility for demonstrating its use in class with a short activity that allows their classmates to practice. Additionally, they are required to apply at least one of the tools in their work and reflect on the experience. As students put together their participatory toolkit we stress that the tools should be adapted and that they should seek to value and use the participatory practices that are already understood by and can be led by the communities with which they work.

See also: [Decolonizing Our Own/Development Storytelling](#)

See also: [Leadership Course](#)

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Unconscious Colonial Mindsets

Colonial mindsets often lead to uneven dynamics in the classroom. Every year, we have students from the Global South who value Western ideas, expertise and technology above approaches coming from their own culture and context, and others who perceive marginalized people within their own country, such as farmers, LGBTQIA+ individuals or rural people as backwards and ignorant. On the other side, we have some US-based students who are so overly sensitive to colonial domination that they feel they cannot have any opinion or play leadership roles in class. These students are likely to romanticize local development and shy away from the possibility of critique of grass-roots actors. We encourage our students to understand the nature of these challenges and to develop practices, gleaned from their courses, that help them to recognize and get distance on their own positionality.

Not all Students Have Experience

The lack of practical experience of some students—undermining their confidence and limiting their classroom contributions—was a bigger challenge early in our program when we were not as selective in our admissions processes. We now require that all students have some experience in community development to draw on. For inexperienced but exceptionally promising students we have created a track whereby they can do an internship or volunteer with an organization during the first year of their studies. The core goal centers the learning process: we want to ensure that every student has some continuous frame of reference for thinking through what they are learning in the program, testing ideas, making observations, and bringing their stories into class for the collective learning process. Not simply “practical,” our pedagogy leans heavily into the benefits of a continuous dialectic between theory and practice.

See also: [Arc of Disillusionment](#)

PD3: Decenter western voices and epistemologies

Scholars in the Global South have raised important critiques of the dominance of the European canon in development studies and the silencing of non-western voices, epistemologies, and research methods. As a first step towards “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo 2009), decolonial thinkers call for bringing subaltern, indigenous, and marginalized voices into the center of the field of study, and continually reflecting on how to include them in ethical and meaningful ways without reifying their subaltern position. In our program, we strive to introduce diverse voices and perspectives in our syllabi, case studies and course materials, and to create a classroom that values the pluriverse wherein diverse knowledge systems can co-exist (Kothari et al. 2019). We encourage students to listen to and seek out marginalized perspectives and worldviews, and to always ask whose voices are not being heard. Within our faculty, several instructors are from the Global South or Native American communities in the US, and orient their teaching accordingly to bring non-Western epistemologies into the classroom. In courses where subaltern voices are not centrally represented, we invite guest speakers and make sure alternative epistemologies are represented in the syllabus. All of this is against the backdrop of the continuously de-centering effect of our diverse learning cohorts and intentional classroom planning.

APPLICATIONS

Working together as a faculty and individually as instructors, we continually reflect on how to incorporate non-Western voices and epistemologies. Some of the useful practices we came up with include diversifying our syllabi, forging institutional partnerships, incorporating indigenous philosophies and guest speakers, “framing” readings, and team teaching. Instructors make choices based on the needs and opportunities of their subject matter. The result has been increasingly rich and dynamic student experience that gives full weight to Global South perspectives on development.

Diversify Syllabi

Two years into our decolonizing initiative, we hosted a two-part workshop with our faculty to guide them in moving beyond western voices and epistemologies. Faculty assessed their assigned readings, case studies and class activities for their representation of a diversity of voices and geographic areas, as well as information mediums – for example videos, podcasts, blogs and development reports that helped to supplement the academic texts and improve the diversity of perspectives. In group discussions, we realized that it was not simple to assess authorship beyond authors’ national and gender identity, and it was often as important that a reading offered an alternative, non-mainstream perspective. It was helpful to do this activity as

a group to discuss common issues and share advice and encouragement about how to find new readings and course materials.

Institutional Partnerships

We have built a long-term partnership with Diné College on the Navajo Nation in the neighboring state of Arizona. Over the past five years, this relationship has allowed our two faculties to co-teach. The partnership began with a three-week immersive summer course about environmental issues on the Navajo Nation. The course took place in residence at Diné College and involved two Regis students from Africa (Ghana and Rwanda), Diné College students, activists, leaders and instructors, and a mix of domestic Regis University and Colorado School of Mines instructors and students. The class, and our continued partnership with Diné College, helped students (and instructors) to reflect on their own roles and stories, think critically about the history of development in the US and open their minds to alternative approaches to development. The following year, we continued the team-teaching format in the course *Grassroots & Indigenous Activism*, which offered an opportunity to present alternative and critical views of development from an Indigenous perspective.

Indigenous Philosophies

Students are introduced to *ubuntu* (“humanity” in Bantu) and *buen vivir* (“the good life” in Spanish) philosophies in the introductory class and we discuss how these worldviews shift thinking about development. We had some rich discussions during the KCDD conference about [“two-eyed seeing”](#) (Morgan & Martin 2022) and how to braid and weave indigenous knowledges with modern/scientific knowledges. Participants brought up the false dichotomy between indigenous/traditional knowledge and modern/scientific knowledge and we decided that it was important that people felt agency to choose the best or the most appropriate knowledge framework for each situation. At the same time, the broader implications of these radically different worldviews and the possibilities they open up provide a utopian aspiration that continuously challenges the complacency of working within the status quo. Indigenous ways of seeing can also be found in the following applications: [Two-eyed Seeing and Weaving Knowledges](#), [Pluriversal Thinking](#), [Participatory Video for Indigenous Advocacy](#), and [Indigenous Perspectives of the Environment](#).

Guest Speakers

The now-ubiquitous video-conferencing software Zoom allows us to invite guest speakers from around the world, and we have had representatives from small NGOs and multilateral development organizations, as well as Indigenous activists and social movement leaders speaking in our classes. Guest speakers bring inspiration with examples of how often abstract and utopian ideas can really work in the world. To keep the coherence of student learning and ownership of that learning, we ask guests to arrive no sooner than fifteen minutes into class so as to give students time to anticipate questions they would like to ask them, and then we ensure there is at least fifteen minutes for discussion after the lecture. This proactive engagement makes possible continuity of peer-centered learning together with the continued expansion of exposure to diverse perspectives.

Framing Readings

When introducing theories and readings, we talk about the positionality of the author and reflect on how someone of a different race, class, gender and so on might have presented an alternative account, what voices and perspectives are missing and why. See also: [Questioning Knowledge Production](#).

Team Teaching

Our classes are team taught to provide a greater variety of perspectives on the class topic. Instructors try to model a relationship of respect and healthy debate that the students pick up on.

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Authority

Several instructors have commented that it can be uncomfortable to introduce non-Western epistemologies without the personal authority to speak to them. We have addressed this by seeking faculty with diversity of perspectives and backgrounds and bringing in guests who can speak directly to the content and material and encouraging our students—who come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds—to share how development is or can be differently oriented and responsive in their contexts. Additionally, we coach faculty in introducing non-Western ideas in a way that is respectful and productive—acknowledging their own limitations with the material, but offering generative content that can spur further conversation. In practice, we move beyond the syllabi to use our students’ own diverse experience to identify both commonalities and contradictions in the literature with the local perspectives on development they have experienced.

Tokenism and Reification

Instructors also worry that simply adding a few non-Western readings is tokenistic and fails to truly challenge the authority of given narratives. Devoting additional time to non-Western readings to show how they unsettle established narratives can move us in the right direction. Students can also be asked to think about what/whose interests the dominant development theories served. There is also a concern about reifying and essentializing the differences between Western and non-Western epistemologies. It can be helpful to use some provoking questions to show that most of us have both “traditional” and “modern” beliefs and practices and to take a historical/anthropological view of a practice or product (whether rap music or McDonalds) to show how it is adapted to the context, and how worldviews inform and interact with each other.

Finding Non-Western Literature

Some additional work is needed to find materials that present non-western perspectives. However, there have been several edited collections published over the last few years that

offer excellent content. See for example: [Global Tapestry of Alternatives](#), and Kothari et. al.'s book, [Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary](#). Some faculty also encourage students to bring in key resources from their own context to add to the diversity of voices students learn from.

Academic Language and Voice

We emphasize that we want to hear students' practitioner voices coming through in whatever they write; that they are always part of a community of learners and teachers, and that they are making real contributions to that community with every assignment. We try not to let them fall into "academic imposter" syndrome, where they lose touch with their passion and experience as practitioners – and we, as instructors, lose touch with who they are and what they are trying to do and say. This is particularly problematic in interactions with international students, where both student and instructor can get distracted with problems of "proper English," losing sight of the substance of the assignment.

PD4: Whole person learning

Whole person learning engages the body and spirit alongside the mind, and invites students to bring their bodies, senses and emotions into the classroom (Schwittay 2021). It contrasts with the dominant approach to learning that is focused on passively absorbing information and distancing oneself from the learning process. As bell hooks (2003) writes, "Education that serves to enhance our students' journey to wholeness stands as a challenge to the existing status quo" (p. 181). In our program, we utilize a variety of techniques to create an environment where students feel they can be themselves and share their backgrounds, experiences, values and beliefs with the confidence that they will be valued. Importantly, many of the arts and theater applications are also useful in community development work, especially when you are working with linguistic diversity, low levels of education, or trying to convey difficult concepts.

APPLICATIONS

Our tools for opening up spaces for participation include full, small, and paired group discussions, case studies, written reflections, group work, chats, shared Google documents, polling, active listening, and role play. Mixing up these different ways of participating allows all students a way to comfortably and productively engage. Experiential and active learning provide ways to engage our bodies and emotions and help us meaningfully integrate difficult concepts. Many of the community building applications (PD1) are also useful in helping students feel more comfortable bringing their full identity and experience into the classroom.

Arts and Theater Techniques

Partnering with a local applied theater group, we have evolved some simple strategies to bring non-academic forms of knowledge and expression into the classroom. Including role play, gestures, story, song and photography has broadened the opportunities for students to succeed and validated different ways of knowing. Alternative approaches to knowledge production have also pushed conventionally successful students outside of their comfort zone, creating a space of vulnerability where growth can happen. We found that theater activities, such as mock development scenarios and role-playing activities, have the potential to increase empathy for different stakeholders, explain difficult concepts, and build a sense of community and shared vulnerability in our classes. Importantly, in development practice, theater for development is also a tool used by practitioners to engage communities, for all the reasons that it works in the classroom. For examples of how we have used role play in our classes see: [Model UN Role Playing with Environmental Stakeholders](#), and [Nile River Role Play](#).

Zoom Room Gestures

In our synchronous Zoom classroom, each cohort creates a set of gestures that they use during their program. These gestures are helpful in cutting across language barriers and provide students another way to stay actively engaged even when they are not speaking. As instructors, we also get valuable feedback from these gestures. Common ideas the gestures represent include: “I don’t understand/I am not following you”, “I agree”, “I disagree”, “Can you go slower”, “This is really exciting/amazing/surprising to me”.

Photo: Students and faculty practicing the gesture “I don’t understand” in our Zoom classroom.



Alternative Modes of Conferencing

At the KCDD conference participants walked the land we occupied to appreciate the specific history of the space, told and shared stories around the campfire, read and discussed [poetry](#), and actively learned dances, greetings, and art forms from different cultures.

Walk the Land

In the classroom we have asked students to describe their journey to work or what they see from their window in as much detail as possible, including smells, social relations, sounds, and physical sensations. When you have new groups coming together at an intentionally selected place, a good way to connect to each other and the place is to walk the land with a guide. This activity mitigates against the abstracted and arguably, colonial, relation to the spaces privileged professionals generally fall into when they are in conference mode. (The extreme of this attitude is captured in the cliché, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.”) The guide should live in the area and be knowledgeable about its history and environmental resources. At the KCDD conference, Dr. Karambu guided our group through her land, explaining the history of the place, the names and uses of different plants, and how local people use and relate to the land. See LO10: consider the environment as foundational to human thriving and an active agent in development work.

Photo: Dr. Karambu leading us in a walk of the land around [Tiriji](#).



CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Faculty Training

Faculty may lack training, confidence and courage for teaching in new ways. It can be very intimidating to set up a role play activity or other experiential or arts-based activity in the classroom, so time and leadership are required to support such growth. Even then, it is advisable to let the early adopters lead and have patience with those who may come around more slowly - or not at all. Our partnership with the Denver arts educators allowed us to provide training to faculty who were interested in using theater techniques in their classrooms. Even minimal training (one hands-on workshop, for example) enabled willing faculty to make small inroads into creative pedagogy, staying within their comfort zone. And the rewards are there: we have seen how even modest breaks into creativity can significantly open up students' learning and ownership of their learning. Among the most intuitive and immediately applicable activities is role-playing, which directly grows the empathic imagination so critical to any decolonial practice.

English Language

English is our official language of instruction, but for half of our students, it is their second, third or fourth language. We recognize that this presents challenges from a decolonizing perspective and a full participation goal. Since our program began, we have been working to improve the experience for students who do not communicate easily in English. We ensure that all students know how to access the university's writing and tutoring centers, where they can receive one on one support. In class, we are deliberate about avoiding slang, shorthand and irony that might also leave some students behind. In small experiments where we have opened up space for students to speak in their own language, we found that this was a powerful experience for students, which allowed them a sense of ease and comfort and a more expansive and creative mindset. For example, inviting people to introduce themselves in their native language always brings smiles to the faces of the speaker and the listeners. It challenges the implicit superiority of English and welcomes multiple identities and heritages. In classrooms where there is a critical mass of students speaking a single language other than English, it can be conducive for deeper learning for those students to have the opportunity to brainstorm a given topic together before moving to English in the general discussion.

PD5: Horizontal learning and co-creation

Peer-to-peer (horizontal) learning and co-creation decenter the teacher as the ultimate authority and allow students to practice agency with respect to their own learning and teaching - a mindset we hope they will carry forward into their careers. Over the course of their

educational experience many students have learned to see each other as competition, rather than as learning partners in the classroom environment. To achieve this more horizontal learning, the faculty work to explicitly center students as bringing valuable experience, knowledge and skills, and then carry that premise over into the structure of assignments.

APPLICATIONS

We provide time in every class for students to share their knowledge and experience; the result is that our students learn a lot from each other – what we call the co-creation of knowledge. Our instructors encourage students’ curiosity about each other’s experiences. In our diverse classroom, this is especially important for grounding theories, projects and practices in different contexts and meanings. We have students present their development challenges to each other to allow collective innovation to generate solutions. Students are encouraged to respond to each other during discussion and also via chat, where students use the @ function to direct their comments to specific people, indicating their agreement or disagreement, raising new questions or perspectives, or sharing relevant resources.

Terms for Dividing the World

In their introductory course, we ask the class what terms they have heard for naming the great division of the world into haves and have nots (First World/Third World, Global South/North, West vs. Rest, Majority World, developing/developed, industrialized/non-industrialized...etc). For each of the terms we discuss what assumptions/connotations/power dynamics they represent. As a class we agree which terms they are most comfortable using and commit to those terms for the duration of the course and the program. This activity helps students to feel ownership of the classroom and encourages them to work together towards consensus.

Collaborative Professional Consultancy

For our participatory planning class, we identify and partner with a non-profit organization that is seeking technical assistance with a participatory plan for a particular project. Our students work together as a consultancy to analyze the situation and propose a plan for greater community engagement. In practice these organizations have been small- to medium-sized organizations based in Mexico, Pakistan, South Africa, Timor-Leste and Uganda. All of these clients have reported implementing the plan they were presented with - especially impressive given that this course is only the second one the students take in the program. A detailed description of this assignment can be found [here](#) in the appendix.

Community-Based Research Class

Every summer we strive to facilitate a community-based research class, following faculty’s own research interests. These classes partner with community organizations to address needs prioritized by marginalized groups. The aim is to move towards co-creating the research

design, methods, collection, analysis and interpretation. Timelines and long IRB² approval processes can make this difficult, but we always strive to ensure that the process is designed together with the group we are working with. For example, from 2021-2023 we partnered with [Housekeys Action Network Denver \(HAND\)](#), an organization that conducts advocacy and outreach with and for the unhoused. Based on their work, they identified the lack of accessible water and bathrooms in the city as an urgent concern. Together we [conducted a research project](#) in which we mapped all water points and bathrooms, interviewed almost 200 unhoused people, and conducted five focus groups. Students involved in this course gained experience developing, conducting and analyzing surveys and focus groups, communicating results, working with community partners, advocating for change, and respectfully engaging marginalized groups. This class also served the goals of LO5.

Student Ownership of Standards

Wherever we can, we find opportunities to give students ownership over the standards by which an assignment may be deemed a success. The foundational step is to tie every assignment to a real-world task or imperative; that is, every major assignment should be meaningful to the student beyond the classroom. As much as anything, the gravitas of the assignment signals respect for the student's professionalism. We discuss criteria and let students contribute to shaping them. We use peer review (a workshop format is best) to let students see in each other's work the impact of the assignment criteria and to experience themselves as exercising collegial support through upholding those criteria. Finally, we grade to reward improvement – and let students own and report on their own improvement. One option is to have them append a memo to submitted work, explaining what dimension of writing they particularly worked on.

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Relativity of knowledge

In some cases, our invitation for everyone to share their perspective can move us towards the relativity of all knowledge, and diminish critique and critical thinking. We try to encourage people to speak from their own lived experience, to develop self-reflexivity about how they came to their own knowledge and beliefs, and to feel comfortable asking their classroom critical questions. The key here is to keep the students in touch with their own real stakes in various positions, to avoid the recourse to academic abstraction. This can be modeled and also structured into class time.

² Institutional Research Board - the academic body that must review any planned research that involves human subjects, with the aim of protecting people from abuse or endangerment. While protection of vulnerable people is always a priority for research design, the IRB approval is only relevant for research that will contribute to generalizable knowledge or be shared publicly.

See also: [Unequal Participation](#)

3. Learning objectives

When we started this work, we were overwhelmed by the weight, abstractness, and size of the concept of decolonization. In order to break down this concept into concrete goals that can be meaningfully tackled in the classroom we created a set of ten Decolonizing learning objectives (DecLOs). The work to create authentic development approaches that break from the colonial structures of the past are explicitly part of the learning objectives of all of our classes. Even where technical knowledge and skill transfer are the overwhelming objective of a class, we support the competencies needed for decolonizing development. We have found the following ten decolonizing learning objectives (DecLOs) to be flexible and useful across the courses of our program. Importantly, each class leans into a couple of these DecLO's and does not try to meet them all.

Each DecLO can be met at three levels: 1) Understand, 2) Analyze, 3) Act on. This hierarchy moves from an academic understanding to real world action. (See the assessment section in chapter 4 where we describe how we use this rating system to analyze student learning, our curriculum, and alumni development practices.)

1. LO1: Understand/Analyze/Act on power dynamics/inequalities at project, community, national, and international level.
2. LO2: (Understand/Analyze/Act on) how my own position (privilege/oppression, identity, biases, motivations, and assumptions) affects a particular development project.
3. LO3: Understand/Analyze/Act to address historical and present-day continuities of colonialism, racism, sexism, structural violence and oppression within development.
4. LO4: (Understand/Analyze/Act to address) how context (culture/history/politics/economics) impacts development in specific places and how people view and experience development.
5. LO5: (Understand how to/Analyze how to /Act to) center marginalized worldviews, knowledges, and voices with curiosity and respect.
6. LO6: (Understand how to, Analyze how to, Act to) engage primary stakeholders in an ethical and culturally sensitive way, recognizing their right to their own space and agency to flourish.
7. LO7: (Understand/Analyze/Act on) creative ideas outside of the current system/structures in order to imagine alternative and more positive futures.

8. LO8: (Understand the importance of, Analyze how to, Act to) develop an open and flexible mind that strives for reflection, continuous learning and critical questioning.

9. LO9: (Understand how to, Analyze how to, Act to) collaborate and partner with people, from a solidarity perspective, owning your role and knowledge, and respecting the role, knowledge, agency of other team and community members.

10. LO10: Understand/Analyze/Act to consider the environment as foundational to human thriving and an active agent in development work.

The following section provides a description of each DecLO followed by a set of applications and any challenges we have observed in trying to meet the LO in our classroom. Here again is the list of symbols that represent the type of contribution each application makes.

Table: Icons representing applications of pedagogies and learning objectives.

 Tool	 Case study
 Principle or concept	 Resource
 Discussion topic	 Strategy
 Activity or Assignment	

LO1: Understand/Analyze/Act on power dynamics/inequalities at project, community, national, and international level.

Murray and Daley (2023) define coloniality as the “structures of power, control and hegemony that have emerged in our contemporary epoch, and that lock states into perpetual trajectories of neo-colonial relations.” Understanding these structures of power and the ways that power circulates and pulses in the system is critical for international development practitioners. At the international level this might mean analyzing the power dynamics between countries and the institutions that shape these dynamics, such as the IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organization, and the military. At the national level, laws and policies, governance, and the freedom and influence of civil society come into play. At the community or project level there are institutions and organizations to consider along with interpersonal dynamics and socio-cultural norms. The interpersonal level carries the particular challenge of forcing students to confront and own their own power, which tends to conflict with their strong identification with being on the side of “good.” Attention to this learning objective helps students and practitioners to look beyond proximate causes of problems to see their root causes, and to consider how national and international dynamics affect programs.

APPLICATIONS



Power Relations in Development

This activity was created by KCDD participants to understand the power dynamics at play in international development. To prepare, create notecards with the titles/description of different stakeholders that might be involved in a development project: local government official, the Ministry of Gender representative, Save the Children (international NGO) country director, old man in the village, community-based organization, youth sports team, etc. Each participant is randomly assigned a stakeholder card that they hide from the rest of the group. All participants form a horizontal line. The facilitator works through a list of first-person statements and, as they do, asks people to take a step forward if, in their role, they identify with the statement. For example, the facilitator might say, “I feel like my voice is heard by the government” or “I have control over my own life.” After a dozen or so of these statements, each participant reveals their role and there is a group discussion about why people moved when they did, any uncertainty they had about stepping forward at a given moment, and how it felt to be identified with their character. Finally, the group discusses what could be done to lessen the distance between the first and last actors.



Analyzing the Role of Global Development Institutions

In our introductory class, we analyze global development decision-making through the lens of the IMF, World Bank and WTO, grounded in a wider discussion of neoliberalism and racial-capitalism (see Leong 2013 for a discussion of this term). We discuss who created the institutions, who leads them, who sets the policies, who makes decisions, and who benefits from the organization. One reading that is helpful in presenting the larger power dynamics of aid is chapter 2 of Arturo Escobar's Encountering Development, "The Problematization of Poverty." In relation to the IMF, we discuss structural adjustment and watch part of Life and Debt in Jamaica (2001) to provide an example of how these play out in a specific country (the minutes 6:30-37:00 are the most relevant). Extending the conversation past the video, we also note different ways that aid conditionality continues.



Dependency Theory and the Origins of Inequality

We have a unit in our introductory course about why there is inequality in our world and why some countries developed much faster than others. We discuss and debate geographic, cultural, governance and colonialism/dependency theories. We present dependency theory as an explanation specific to the colonization of the Global South. Students think about and discuss how dependency theory might still be operating today. A recent article about dependency theory is Chapter 2 of Murray and Daley's (2023) book, "Impoverishment is an Active Process: Capitalism and Development." This reading provides a sweeping historical and theoretical overview of dependency theory and the problems with modernization theory.



Unequal Global Distribution of Food, Water and Energy

We discuss the starkly unequal access to these three critical, interdependent resources from a political economy perspective. Our discussion necessarily ranges widely, moving from global trade to corporate power, privatization, water and land grabs, neo-colonialism, etc, as well as the interrelations between and among them. The very interdependence of food, water and energy provide a stark illustration of the interdependence, in real development context, that demands the kind of holistic thinking that conventionally-focused narr A good case study for provoking discussion is: Borras, Saturnino. 2011. "The Politics of Agro-fuels and Mega-land and Water Deals...".



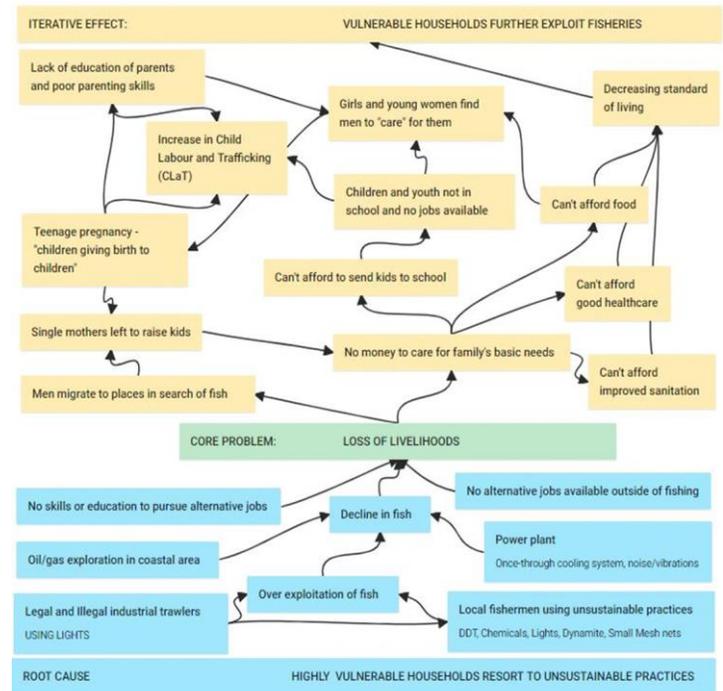
Political Ecology Analysis of Environmental Issues

In a group activity, students analyze what happened to Lake Chad. Since 1963, Lake Chad has shrunk to barely a twentieth of its original size. In small groups, students interrogate why the lake has almost disappeared. The learning goal here is to encourage them to identify bigger players and dynamics (carbon emissions in Europe, war and displacement, lack of governance,

private irrigation schemes, water grabs, etc.), rather than defaulting to proximate causes related to the habits of poor people.

Systems and Root Cause Analysis 

Variants of systems analysis provide a heuristic tool that has helped our students to understand how a particular approach or problem is embedded in a larger (colonial) context that solidifies and reproduces it. Different approaches to systems analysis —participatory, economic, environmental, gender, health—are part of many of the program’s course curricula. Students map the social and structural factors contributing to solving or not solving problems. They grapple with understanding wicked problems and how sustainability, citizen activism and economic progress are interwoven with the pursuit of greater rights and participation. Root cause analysis helps students develop theories of change which they also learn in the program and which are required in their capstones. The photo is an example of a student’s problem tree analysis of the loss of livelihoods for youth in Ghana.



See also: [Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis](#) 

See also: [Terms for Dividing the World](#) 

See also: [Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation](#)  

See also: [Stakeholder Analysis](#) 

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Feelings of Hopelessness

Focusing on the power dynamics of aid often leaves students feeling helpless and disillusioned, overwhelmed by the higher-level power dynamics that they have little control of. One way of addressing this issue is to pay attention to agency: the leverage and ways of maneuvering that

are possible even in restricted situations. We provide examples of how Global South actors have gained influence or improved their position (regional trade, South-South trade, aid effectiveness movements, SDG 17, G77, WTO negotiations, World Social Forum, etc.). Within our broader curriculum, we name this agency as *leadership*, and teach practices designed to help students own and grow those characteristics and strategies that let them recognize and exercise their power in most any situation. Ideas discussed [in LO7](#) are also useful in addressing this challenge.

Tension Between Equity and Inclusion Frameworks

The gender, equity and social inclusion (GESI) frameworks used commonly in international development typically focus on gender disparities and lack a specific focus on race or sexuality, while the DEI frameworks used for U.S domestic work tend to center race. As to sexual orientation, there is a growing but still tentative space for discussing sexuality in international development. Recognizing that the choice of a framework can be politically fraught, close attention must always be paid to local circumstances and stakes. The ideal, however, would always be an intersectional analysis.

See also: [Boundaries of Analysis](#)

LO2: (Understand/Analyze/Act on) how my own position (privilege/oppression, identity, biases, motivations, and assumptions) affect a particular development project.

This learning objective prompts students and practitioners to reflect on how their backgrounds, identities and relative privilege and oppression position them within development context, affecting the way that they see an issue, as well as how people respond to them. We stress that our positionality also informs our epistemology - the way we know and understand our world, which is often assumed and unquestioned. Having a structured reflexive process of unpacking our assumptions, motivations, biases, and norms based on our identities, backgrounds and educations helps us understand our own blind spots and limitations, especially in providing inclusive and equitable programming and creating spaces within which they can happen. Recognizing one's positionality can also help practitioners be aware of the power dynamics at play in a given context and engage with communities and their colleagues more effectively. Discussing this process of reflexivity and sharing our own positionality in small groups has been a powerful way for us to build community and ensure this is an ongoing practice in our program.

APPLICATIONS

Positionality statement



A positionality statement describes how one's background, experiences, gender, race, beliefs, and other important self-identified qualities might relate to the work at hand. It can be used to

support a development report or a research report to show the practitioner's strengths and weaknesses vis a vis a given project. A good guide for writing and facilitating these statements can be found [here](#).



Insider and Outsider Dynamics

In one of the first classes students read Sultana's article (2007) "Reflexivity, Positionality and Participatory Ethics...". As a full group we discuss her argument that paying greater attention to issues of reflexivity, positionality and power relations in the field helps to enable ethical and participatory research. Then we break into paired discussion to answer the following questions: In what ways are you (or have you been) an *insider* and in what ways are you (or have you been) an *outsider* in the places you have worked? How does your lived experience determine the way you understand and work with low income populations? How do people in low income areas perceive you? Based on such analysis, how might we mitigate some of the power dynamics in personal interactions with the community?



Orientalism

We watch and reflect on [Edward Said's ideas on Orientalism](#). (We watch the first 10 min. 30 seconds). This video on Orientalism prompts great conversations about how and why depictions about particular places/groups of people are created and become deeply embedded in culture, and how this phenomenon affects development work.



Diversity Wheel Exercise

This is a [well-established set of activities](#) for starting discussions about identity, power and positionality. While the activity is typically done individually, there can be a lot of deep and productive discussion in small groups sharing overall insights and reflections from the process.



Intersectionality

We present the concept of intersectionality using Crenshaw's "Mapping the Margins" reading. We found clear examples such as analyzing the pay gaps between men and women in the U.S, and then looking at the pay gaps between women of different races to be useful for understanding the concept. The diversity wheel exercise can also be used effectively in discussions about intersectionality. Another reading that is really helpful in this discussion is: Kagal et al. 2020. "Towards an intersectional praxis in international development." This reading speaks to the importance of understanding everyone's experience and designing interventions to fit the lived realities of a much wider range of people. It provides a strong motivation for an

intersectional and reflective practice, and describes how we can follow a mutual learning and strengths-based collaboration model across boundaries.



Personal Reflection Papers

Students write two reflection papers in the gender and development class and share them in pairs. The sharing is verbal; they do not read them verbatim, and can choose to leave anything out they are not comfortable sharing. The first paper is about privilege and oppression, where students reflect on their intersectional identity and which aspects of their identity have been marginalized, excluded, or have less power, and which have more power and privilege relative to other people. A second paper has students reflect on their assumptions about gender and sexuality and how these ideas have changed over the course of their growing up. In both papers students are encouraged to include personal stories that illustrate their analysis. Many students find this to be one of the deepest and most memorable experiences in our program.



Educational Biography

This assignment asks students to engage in deep reflection on their experiences of schooling and education more broadly. Students complete an autobiography and an analysis of around five pages. The autobiography recounts in detail the student's experience with formal, informal and non-formal education, while the analysis examines the role education and schooling played in their personal (culture & identity) and professional (career choice) development, as well as the major social justice themes that emerge from their story.



See also: [Knowing Your Role in the Group](#)

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Need for Skilled facilitation

Conversations about positionality and reflexivity need to be carefully facilitated by someone with expertise, as these conversations can be uncomfortable and students might push back in a variety of ways, some of them unpredictable. The diversity and inclusion trainings offered in most universities will help faculty with these conversations. Faculty might also invite a guest facilitator for sessions that might be particularly charged.

Feeling Paralyzed by Privilege

In some cases, relatively privileged learners might respond defensively and have trouble identifying the invisible privileges they have grown up with. Other students respond to the recognition of privilege with paralyzing guilt or with a sense of their own irrelevance to development efforts. Our response is to encourage the detachment and humility to see all of

us as historically situated and thereby lessen the moral burden of privilege as well as poverty. This is not to deny privilege or responsibility: we encourage students and practitioners to acknowledge and use their privilege as ethically as possible for the good of the community. As one of our students put it, “you need to own your own role and knowledge, your skills and the position you bring, rather than hiding behind these.”

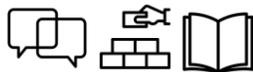
Navel Gazing

Another challenge is keeping these exercises from turning so far inward that they lose practical purpose. One mitigating approach is to use grounded questions like: How does your identity affect your role in a/this development project? What is your responsibility to global inequality based on your lifestyle, background and identity? In what types of situations/contexts should you contribute and when should you hold back? Where are your strengths, your weaknesses and your blind spots? How can you compensate for your blind spots and weaknesses?

LO3: Understand/Analyze/Act to address historical and present-day continuities of colonialism, racism, sexism, structural violence and oppression within development.

Many present-day patterns of inequality, environmental exploitation, sexism, racism, violence and corruption can be traced back to specific policies and actions imposed and enforced during the colonial time period. For example, racism, which is largely absent from discussions of international development, emerged as a justification of colonialism and remains embedded in the system and everyday development practices (Kothari 2006). Development remains driven by the white, western, powers, and is still, to some extent, based on a sense of moral and physical superiority. This learning objective requires attention to the context-specific relations of colonial violence, exploitation and oppression that persist in our post-colonial world. It calls for directly engaging with the colonial history and policies, and the neoliberal and militaristic regimes that contribute to inequalities we see today. Connecting colonial history to the present is critically important in this cultural moment when there is a strong right-wing push to invisibility or what Kapoor (2023) calls a “whitewashing” of colonialism to focus on its ostensibly positive outcomes.

APPLICATIONS



Malinchismo

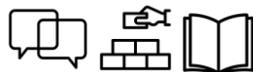
Malinchismo is a Spanish term that conveys the colonial mindset in its admiration and preference for white or western ideas, products, and systems over national ones. It can be used to illuminate the colonized mind, internalized self-hatred and oppression, and the idea of white saviorism. When participants introduced this idea at the KCDD conference, many people found the concept personally useful in understanding their inner tensions over living between two cultures, and as a group we also identified ways that *malinchismo* insidiously makes its way into development projects. As one alumna reflected, “The term ‘malinchismo’ also made me

reconsider activities that I developed in my capstone project. My project goal was to assist female newcomers (refugees and immigrants) to assimilate into the U.S using social connectedness. After learning more about *malinchismo*, I wonder if my project lacked cultural sensitivity and was pushing participants towards U.S culture, and away from their own cultures.” This [song](#) about Malinch’s curse is powerful to watch and discuss. Some guiding questions for discussion: What examples of *malinchismo* have you witnessed where you live? How does *malinchismo* affect your own culture? How does *malinchismo* impact development projects? What are some strategies to mitigate the effect of this?



Decolonization is Not a Metaphor

The well-known article by Tuck and Yang (2012), “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor” has inspired many discussions about the material implications of decolonization, especially in settler colonial contexts. For discussion of this article, a couple of guiding questions are: 1) Decolonization has become a buzz word in our conversations. What types of tangible and material steps can be taken decolonization? 2) How do the impacts of colonization and colonialism show up today? 3) How does colonization differ between still-occupied lands and previously colonized nations? How does it differ between settler and non-settler forms of colonization?



Racism in Development

Students read Kothari’s. (2006) “An agenda for thinking about ‘race’ in development...” In small groups students discuss how racism is visible or invisible in their development work or lives. In our diverse classroom such discussion provides specific examples for how race functions in particular contexts. (Note: without diversity in the classroom it might be necessary to provide some case studies). It is also useful to think not only about interpersonal dynamics, but also cultural and institutional forms of racism. An excellent resource for people who want to learn more about racism and white supremacy in the United States [is the website White Supremacy Culture](#), which hosts helpful historical content, lists for further reading, and itemized characteristics of white supremacy that can be used to prompt discussion.



Gender and Colonization

We have a unit on non-western conceptions of gender that illuminates the ways that colonialism created and reinforced strict gender binaries and norms of heterosexuality in places where gender and sexuality was historically more fluid. We examine how current development approaches to gender might also unintentionally replicate colonial dynamics. Oyěwùmí’s (1997) [The Invention of Women](#) provides a productive critique of the Western development focus on women and biological determinism, and offers a new way of understanding social categories based on Yoruba culture. Murray and Daley’s (2023) chapter 6: “Critiquing

Heteronormativity and the Male Gaze: Queering Development and Beyond,” explores how colonial heteronormativity and the male gaze have shaped and constrained not only international development, but intimate relations for people living in post-colonial spaces. One very negative outcome is the tendency for legitimating and even fostering sexual and gender based violence. A particularly stark example is the history of Two-Spirit indigenous people whose identities European settlers sought to eradicate, leaving lasting psychological scars and socially sanctioned discrimination. [A Guide for Two-Spirited People for First Nations Communities](#) describes Two-Spiritness and offers a curriculum for teaching this history.

The Ugly History of Research and Colonization



We start the class by acknowledging the violent colonial history of research and the ways research has justified colonialism and exploitation. In the present-day context, research has been named by many indigenous groups as another form of extraction, just like mining or drilling for oil. In one example of indigenous groups fighting this tendency, the Navajo Nation has developed its own, strictly enforced, human research review board (see the 2020 Navajo Nation Human Research Review Board). A good resource about this history is the book [Decolonizing Methodologies](#) (2021). We recommend assigning the introduction by Linda Tuhiwai Smith for an overview of the topic. As a follow-on, Chapter 9, by Madeline Whetung (Nishnaabeg) and Sarah Wakefield in [Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education](#) (2019) offers some useful guidance for decolonizing research ethics.

See also: [Dependency Theory and the Origins of Inequality](#)



See also: [Participatory Video for Indigenous Advocacy](#).



See also: [Origin Story of Your Discipline](#)



CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Colonialism Across Contexts

One challenge in a global classroom is doing justice to specificities of colonial history and its ongoing harms across regional geographies. Peer to peer learning can help to bridge that gap. Providing some general history of colonialism and its impacts can provide a foundation for students to share from their own contexts ways that they see the colonial legacy in their daily lives. In a less diverse classroom, taking the time to study two disparate geographic contexts

for their particularities and contrasts can have much the same impact. This can be achieved through pairing a couple of readings focused on a locally resonant impact of colonization.

LO4: (Understand/Analyze/Act to address) how context (culture/history/politics/economics) impacts development in specific places and how people view and experience development.

This learning objective pushes practitioners to move away from single solutions conceived in Western power centers to think about what might be effective (or not) due to particular political, economic, historical, social or cultural circumstances. It involves eschewing technocratic presumptions of “objective, neutral and universal” development projects to learn about how people situated in a particular place and time see the world and envision their futures. This is a holistic perspective that considers how cultural norms, rainy seasons, political incentives, or gender dynamics might affect a project. It looks at all the dimensions that affect behavior and might impact the outcomes of a project. In our classes we use case studies and context-specific assignments to compel students to think through the multidimensional contexts of development and we explicitly tie part of their grade to researching and taking these factors into account. A simple prompt we use in guiding discussions is, “*In your context...how are LGBTQ+ people treated, how do financial services reach the poor, what are the meanings and social practices around water, etc.?*” A greater challenge comes when working outside of a place that you know well. In such a case we ask, “How can we learn about context in an ethical, inclusive, and practical way?”

APPLICATIONS

Strengths-Based Perspectives

A needs assessment may unduly focus on the problems and deficiencies in a community, which is more likely to lead to external solutions that fail to build on what is already working, and the strengths and agency people have available - or are already bringing - to the problem. Focusing on local strengths, assets and leadership, as well as explicit local agendas, provides a cultural basis as well as practical means by which to operationalize localization strategies and decolonize knowledge agendas. A strengths-based inquiry begins with the premise that communities have agency, power and resources, and development projects need to understand and build from these. An activity to practice this way of thinking is to have students redirect a typical needs assessment toward a strengths-based orientation.



Literature Review

In our research and learning class we teach students how to write a literature review. While we have received push-back from both students and faculty that this exercise is too academic, we feel strongly that it is a necessary piece of the due diligence required for any practitioner to ensure that they are building on all the relevant learning and not repeating mistakes when working with a community. It is also necessary for grant applications and is a great critical thinking exercise. Initially, we spend time ensuring that students understand that the purpose of the literature review is to inform the design of their program or project. We divide the assignment of writing a Capstone literature review into several pieces and provide support and feedback through the process. We teach this in the following steps: 1) find academic and “grey” literature; 2) evaluate literature for relevance, rigor, and trustworthiness; 3) write an annotated bibliography; 4) write a literature review outline; and 5) synthesize. Some other tools that are useful are a literature map ([this Youtube video](#) describes the process), which also provides better access to the assignment for visual learners and those that might find academic formality intimidating. We have found synthesis - the process of subsuming a range of sources to one’s own logic for the paper - to be particularly difficult to teach. Helping students to bring synthesis down to a level of common sense can be achieved through structured verbal discussion. We break students into small groups to talk through a simple “argument” (What animal makes the best pet?) and then come together in the large group to synthesize their findings (“While most students agreed that dogs were the friendliest, only a quarter of them preferred dogs for pets.”) Simple exercises like this help students to identify “synthesis” as part of their own familiar skill set and make available to them an important basic tool for pursuing the social justice passions that drive them.



Collecting Context Specific Data

This is not always a straightforward process, as there might be missing data, power dynamics related to how data is collected, and debates about who can speak for a given community. Practitioners warn us to be careful and ethical in how we acquire context specific knowledge: Are you relying on one person? Do they really represent the community? What voices are being left out? Is the knowledge co-created with, or extracted from, the community? Are people compensated for their time/knowledge? For ethical data collection, collaboration with local organizations and expertise is needed, along with adequate time and budget. Although a collaborative process requires more initial resources, it will lead to more effective, inclusive and sustainable development work.



Participatory Data Collection

We introduce several useful participatory planning tools (see table below) that are well suited to understanding a new context. These tools not only inform context, but work towards greater participation of stakeholders, help to integrate local and traditional knowledge, and promote ownership at the community level. Planning for development—the identification of the problem, the formulation of solutions, implementation, and evaluation & learning—continue over the life of the project and beyond. Students each choose a tool to apply to their own work and afterwards, reflect on the experience.

Selected Participatory Planning Tools and Their Uses/Outputs Taught in Our Program

Mapping	Seasonal calendars & resources
Participatory Budgeting	Advocacy, program integration
Photovoice	Community events & displays
Social Network Analysis	Network diagrams
Stakeholder Analysis	Power mapping
Storytelling	Theater & communications
SWOT Analysis	Team building
Systems Analysis	Systems mapping, problem tree
World Cafe	Collective problem solving

During the course, students notice and try to elevate the practices they come across—group meetings, traditional elders fora, community savings practices and religious and family rituals for example—as “tools” on which they can also build. Two good resources for the tools are: Narayanasamy, N. (2009). *Participatory Rural Appraisal* and Rifkin S., and Pridmore, P. (2002). *Partners in Planning*.



Defining Development

In our opening unit on defining development we ask students to think of their own definitions of development and then we discuss and map these as a full group. To challenge what are usually optimistic definitions, we share some quotes from our research and from indigenous people about their negative experiences with development. This gives students permission to critique the positivity of development ethos and often creates room for them to share from their experiences. We also read Watene’s (2015) “Culture and sustainable development”, a short article on indigenous perspectives on the SDGs, as a great way to look at whose perspectives and priorities are missing from global goals.



Measuring Development in Culturally Appropriate Ways

In class, we critically evaluate different ways of measuring and evaluating poverty in development, including looking at GDP, the SDGs, the multi-dimensional poverty index, poverty line monetary measures, and the global happiness index. An article by Tache et al. (2010) “Pastoralists conceptions of poverty...”, provides a good case study by exploring how pastoralists in Ethiopia understand poverty and how their concepts (don’t) align with monetary poverty line definitions. One good discussion prompt has students consider who defines success and how this differs for various stakeholders. For an assignment, small groups choose a low-income country and select and justify 3-5 measurements of development that they feel best express the development progress or challenges in that country. We also provide links so that students can explore all the significant databases related to measuring poverty (for example, the [Human Development Index](#)).



Analyzing Cases from Different Perspectives

In our class on the food, water, energy nexus we have students analyze specific nexus case studies from political economy, environmental justice and socio-cultural perspectives. We begin by discussing some key questions that come out of each of these perspectives and then students are assigned the role of representing a specific perspective for each case study. This exercise compels them to think deeply about a project from different perspectives.



Human Centered Design (HCD)

HCD is a well-established process that helps to adapt products and interventions to the local context and people’s preferences and needs. It can be used to locally ground large, multiple country projects. As one of our alumni describes it: “Before we begin to implement anything, we use Human Centered Design (HCD) to really understand the context of local communities and listen to stakeholders. We work in 10 developing countries and recognize that what works in one country might not work in another, and what works in one region of a country may not work in the neighboring region.”



Tools for Content Analysis

There are a wide variety of tools that have been designed for context analysis. Some of the key categories of these tools are political economy analysis, [\(PEA\)](#), Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal and Environmental Analysis [\(PESTEL\)](#), Tools for Institutional, Political, and Social Analysis [\(TIPS\)](#), Analysis of the Resilience of Communities to Disaster [\(ARC-D\)](#). Students could apply one of these tools to analyze the context of a development issue everyone knows well, or a case study.

See also: [Gender and Social Inclusion Analysis](#)



CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Practical Implementation Challenges

Outside the classroom, the practical realities of implementing development projects can make realizing this learning objective challenging. For example, one might need to write a grant for a project that one has never visited, there might be logistical challenges collecting data from the community, or there might not be flexibility to adjust the project based on the context. To some extent, these challenges can be mitigated with a project design that dedicates time and resources to understanding the context at the start of the project and allows for adaptation throughout the project cycle. See [Adaptive Management](#).

Boundaries of Analysis

When conducting an in-depth analysis of context and power, it can be challenging to know where to define boundaries so that the analysis is not so overwhelming and complex that it is useless. Typically, in international development, we are focused on a combination of spatial or population group boundaries. If the policy, norm, environmental condition doesn't directly affect the people we are working with, we do not focus on it. Another factor to consider is, at what level, and in what sector, your organization is equipped to make a difference. Is it set up to advocate at the state level for a new education curriculum or welfare policy, for example? Setting the boundaries of analysis at the sphere of influence of your organization is a logical approach. However, it can still be useful to identify other factors outside this sphere because there may be indirect ways that you could address these factors, such as partnering with another organization. A stakeholder analysis is another useful tool for defining boundaries.

LO5: (Understand how to/Analyze how to /Act to) center marginalized worldviews, knowledges, and voices with curiosity and respect.

Development studies originates from the Euro-centric canon and does not acknowledge the Southern, indigenous and other voices that were violently silenced through colonialism (Santos 2007). To counteract this history, we strive to decenter European thinkers and theories and create space for marginalized and silenced voices and perspectives in the syllabus and class discussions. However, as other critical theorists and educators warn, the well-intentioned inclusion of marginalized voices can become tokenistic and reify the subaltern position of certain types of knowledge (Sultana 2019). We have found that asking critical questions about knowledge production when we introduce a reading or theory helps unsettle the taken-for-

granted system of knowledge production (Santos 2007). Another entry point for this learning is looking at the type of knowledge produced by colonialism and how it benefited the colonial endeavor and silenced indigenous, non-Western and subaltern writers, thinkers and practices. In addition to diversifying the authors in a syllabus, we also think about diversifying the ways of learning and types of knowledge that are considered valid by finding ways to bring storytelling, spirituality, land-based embodied knowledge, non-human voices, ceremony, oral traditions, video, and other creative and theater arts into the classroom ([See Pedagogy 4](#)).

APPLICATIONS



Let People Tell their Own Stories

Use community-led storytelling and/or participatory video to allow people to tell their own stories in ways that are comfortable and appropriate for them. As an African proverb wisely states, “Until the lion learns to write, history will always glorify the hunter.” Some roles and practices for the development practitioner to use under this model include: proactively creating and facilitating opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard; facilitating capacity strengthening efforts to enhance the skills and confidence of people to speak in public settings; opening spaces and channels to amplify voices; publicly acknowledging people for their ideas and achievements; and connecting individuals and groups that can support and learn from each other.



Voice. Author: Ijeoma Okwor (University of Winnipeg alumna)

The Government of Netherlands funds [Voice](#), a direct grant program “supporting rights holders and groups facing marginalization or discrimination in their efforts to exert influence in accessing productive and social services and political participation.” In ten countries in Africa and Asia, the program focuses on the positive efforts of rights holders pursuing their dreams and working towards a more inclusive world. It is motivated by the principle, “nothing about us, without us” and supports ownership of the influencing agenda by the people concerned. Five groups are centered in the program: women facing exploitation, abuse and/or violence, people with disabilities, LGBTQI individuals, indigenous people and ethnic minorities, vulnerable elderly and youth. The program ensures that these rights holders groups produce, own and control their own narratives using accessible media. One piece of the program, called Voices of Change, is a series about grantees telling their own stories of how they create change in their communities. The voices range from personal reflections, observations and interviews to conversations. They are presented in a variety of ways, such as written stories, interviews, publications, poems, videos and more recently, podcasts.



Participatory Video for Indigenous Advocacy. Source: Samwel Nangiria

Participatory video is “a set of creative and participatory techniques designed to involve a group of individuals in exploring their own history through the making of their own film. It uses

video to enable individuals, groups and communities to explore issues that concern themselves while experimenting with other individual and social postures [to] stimulate a dynamic of change that emanates from within” ([Visual Exchange](#)).

Participatory video has been a tool for preserving culture and defending land rights for the Maasai. One of the leaders of the Maasai participatory video project, Samwel Nangiria, joined us at the KCDD. We were fortunate to hear first-hand about his brave and innovative work as an activist, facilitator, and videographer. Samwel explained the challenges faced by the Maasai community in Tanzania, highlighting the land grab pressures they face from conservation and tourism projects. The Maasai, who have historically served as guardians of the land and animals, now find their traditional way of life and connection to the land impugned and under threat. The exploitation of their land not only disregards their rights as citizens but also disrupts their culture and livelihoods, serving as a harsh reminder that indigenous rights are still at risk.

Here is the first participatory video explaining the land rights struggle in [Loliondo, Tanzania](#) and a second video about the [women-led movement to defend the territory](#). Samwel and his community have also used [participatory video to document their efforts to decolonize the museums](#) that have plundered and now display Maasai artifacts. They are challenging the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University to make them aware of their colonial history and find ways to responsibly address this violence through healing and [education](#). This effort is part of a wider project with [InsightShare’s Living Culture](#) initiative to support Indigenous peoples to protect their territories, languages, and cultures using participatory video. The videos shared here speak to the powerful potential of participatory video and the very real present-day effects of neocolonialism.

Photo: Samwel teaching participatory video to Maasai women (and staff of For The Good, see case study below). Photo Credit: Kate Lapides





Decolonizing Our Own/Development Storytelling

People from dominant demographics typically control the stories we tell about our history, cultures and social relations far more than they often recognize. The impact is to deeply embed in our psyches Western-centric understandings of the world and its dynamics. Controlled by the narrative of White saviorism, NGOs will design projects and programs that center their own agency, defining the communities they target as their objects of need. In turn, target communities as well as development practitioners identified with the Global South will understand themselves as lacking and in thrall to the solutions, paradigms and experts of the Global North.

To build critical awareness and practical skill among our students and interested practitioners, we partnered with a mission-driven start-up, Rebel Spirit Media, to develop a set of short courses teaching a process for decolonizing the stories we tell about development work. Students were invited to tell the story of their own work on a project or program, centering the affected community and bringing them fully into the process of shaping the narrative; ideally, the community would not just partner but actually lead the process. Classes devoted significant time to discussing the challenges inherent in creating this dynamic, with students sharing strategies for minimizing their own voice while still keeping the project moving forward. Because of its accessibility and power, we focused on digital story-telling and tools. The courses combined ongoing deep reflection with the practical work of community engagement and learning the techniques of camera work and editing. We were able to partner with a local cinema to showcase the final products and invite public attention to critical story-telling.



Nile River Role Play

We have used role play activities in several classes to allow students to experience an issue from a deeper and more empathetic perspective. We have found that it is important to plan these activities carefully, to project confidence, and to participate ourselves. One example comes from our food, water, energy and climate class, where we facilitate a role play activity about the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Nile River. We assign students characters such as: The Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization; a semi-nomadic livestock herder in Ethiopia; a large-scale sugar farmer in Egypt; or the World Food Program in The Sudan. Students research their assigned role and come to class in character (props and costumes encouraged!). In the first round, everyone introduces themselves and states their concerns and interests related to the GERD project. During this round, everyone should be taking notes and thinking about potential alignment of positions and shared interests. Who might you be able to collaborate with? In the second round, we form breakout groups by countries and international actors like the World Food Program and encourage each group to come up with a policy or initiative they can all agree on and want to share with the larger group. In the third round, a representative from each group reads the group's proposed

policies or initiatives. There should be time for any stakeholder to ask questions or raise concerns. The facilitator (Chairperson) calls for a vote on the various initiatives; for a resolution to “pass” it needs 3 out of 4 of the groups to agree. Students have all really enjoyed this activity, even if they begin a bit skeptical. In evaluations of this activity, students responded that they saw how complex and difficult transboundary river governance is, that they gained a real sense of empathy for their characters, and they realized the importance of really listening and understanding everyone's perspectives. All important learning outcomes!

Representation Matters: Materials for Maasai girls. Author: Kate Lapides (Regis MDP alumna)



One of our alumni works as a communication professional for the organization “[For the Good](#)”. Kate creates external facing fundraising and awareness raising communications for existing donors, communications for program work, annual reports and social media, and also training material for staff and 17 young Maasai interns in Kenya. She says that she is always working to identify and center relevant, historically marginalized voices in her material. When For the Good had to pivot to an offline learning platform during Kenya’s COVID-school closures, Kate helped curate stories, literature, and other content by female, African and Maasai authors to support students’ learning. That content continues to populate the Remote Area Community Hotspots for Education and Learning (RACHEL by World Possible) and other classroom learning resources the organization provides to secondary school teachers in remote regions of Kenya. Kate is particularly proud of a project to write and design posters and storybooks called "Goodnight Stories for Maasai Girls" featuring the stories of ten Maasai women creating powerful change and breaking boundaries. (The books are modeled after the popular "Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls" series). Her organization currently gives them to individual girls and pre-school teachers as budget allows. In the future, Kate is hoping to work with For the Good’s interns to build small school libraries in many of the organization’s 40+ partner primary schools to offer similar relevant material centering voices the girls can see themselves in.

“Representation matters. Especially for the girls we work with, who might otherwise never, ever, ever come across any content that might expose her to the idea of what women can do.”-Kate Lapides, MDP alumna

See also: [Community Based Research Class](#)



See also: [Defining Development](#)



See also: [Poetry](#) 

See also: [Preserving History and Culture in Colorado.](#) 

See also: [Shift power to the community: KCDF](#) 

See also: [Pedagogy 3: Decenter Western Voices and Epistemologies](#)

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Implementation Challenges

Ijeoma helped lead the “Voice” project in Nigeria discussed above, and she shared several questions that her team grappled with: 1) Who determines which ‘marginalized’ voices matter? 2) How do we center these voices when their message does not align with our own agenda? 3) Does every marginalized voice matter equally? 4) As practitioners, is there a time to step in; if so, how do we identify this thin line and how do we manage the situation in such a way that it does not compromise our standards or the agency of the community we represent? 5) How do we keep grantees safe when their voices may threaten the government? These are all important questions to grapple with that show that inclusion of non-western voices is not a straightforward process.

LO6: (Understand how to, Analyze how to, Act to) engage primary stakeholders in an ethical and culturally sensitive way, recognizing their right to their own space and agency to flourish.

This learning objective offers some guidance beyond the common refrain of “working with the community.” An ethical and culturally sensitive approach does not impose norms, practices and values on people and respects their right to make their own choices. Development practitioners often forget that communities have their own priorities, institutions, and traditions that need to be respected rather than ignored, molded or changed. This means understanding peoples’ rich and complex lives as strengths, rather than the common mindset that assumes low income and marginalized groups are helpless or waiting for development to save them. Everyone needs space and agency to make their own choices, even if these choices are not understood by the development practitioners (Kabeer 1999 and Cornwall 2003).

APPLICATIONS

Shift Power to the Community: KCDF

The [Kenya Community Development Foundation \(KCDF\)](#) began in 1997 to support local organizations working towards improving their own communities. We were lucky enough to have them speak at our Kenya conference. Their model is based on recognizing the indigenous knowledge, energy and capacity of people to lead their own development agenda. KCDF mobilizes local resources alongside external funding to retain more control over the development process and directly supports community organizations. This approach eliminates a lot of the typical bureaucracy, overhead, and external control of development. Grants are given within broad categories, such as livelihoods and education, to allow people a high degree of freedom to work towards their own vision of a good society. KCDF has an intentional focus on shifting the power of development dynamics to “create more equitable and just development outcomes that are rooted in the self-determined aspirations of local communities.” Other aspects of KCDF’s decolonizing approach include changing the language of beneficiaries and recipients to enable new ways of working and thinking, ensuring that external funding recognizes, respects, and builds on local resources and assets, and moving away from “building capacity” as defined by external actors and requirements, towards community organizing and movement building. Another unique aspect of the organization is how they openly speak about changing themselves, and having the “humility and boldness to be ready to challenge our [own] power and to listen to and work with others.”

“Community led development, is not only the right thing to do, but also the most effective and sustainable.”-Kennedy Odera, KCDF community coordinator.

If and When Development Practitioners Should Challenge Gender or Cultural Norms

This question has always been central to the gender class and we have lively discussions about whether, or under what circumstances, practitioners should intervene in the practices of communities that do not align with Western norms of gender equality. It always helps to have specific examples to refer to if the students don’t bring their own. A few readings we like related to the topic of challenging cultural/social norms are: Cislalaghi, Beniamino. (2019). “ALIGN Community led approaches to Changing Harmful Gender Norms.” Kato-Wallace, Jane et al. (2019). “Adapting a Global Gender-Transformative Violence Prevention Program for the U.S...” McChesney, Kay (2015) "Successful Approaches to Ending Female Genital Cutting."



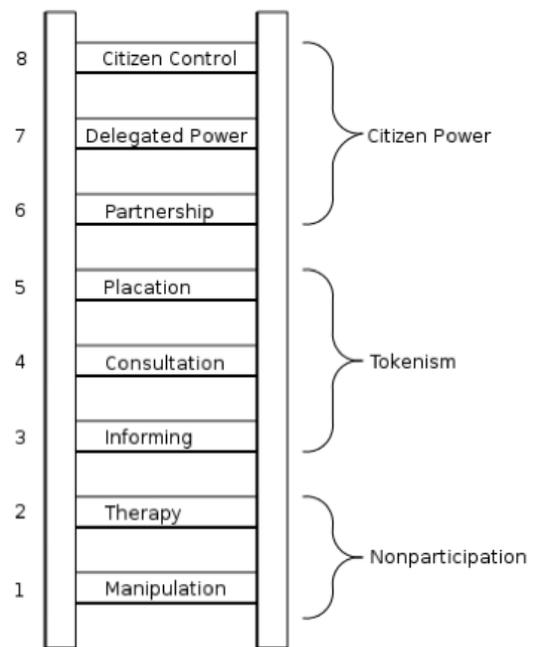
The (White) Savior Complex

In the gender course we also discuss the prevalence of the idea of saving “The Other” in development. Some guiding discussion questions are: Historically, where does this idea of the white savior come from? What is assumed in the savior narratives and what perspectives are ignored or unseen? How does the savior complex shape development programs? A few classic articles that discuss these questions are: Cornwall, Andrea. 2003. “Whose Voices? Whose Choices?...”, and Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). “Do Muslim women really need saving?”



Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation

Sheri Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation (see figure on the right) provides a thoughtful and practical window into levels of participation. Considering it together with students brings out their personal experiences of how communities might be manipulated or used and leads to greater understanding of how such dynamics can be transformed into greater participation in the decisions that affect us. Another resource we use in tandem with the participation ladder is the Burkinabé film, [Zan Boko \(1988\)](#), which gives us a common frame of reference for discussing local peoples’ perspectives of and participation in development. In our experience, the “wording” of the ladder rungs needs to be discussed and defined based on the context and culture of a student’s background. Asking different students to give examples of a development program’s impact and approach makes for a rich discussion and can stimulate important insights about how power dynamics play out and how our own work can be oriented towards greater degrees of autonomy and ownership of local development.



Sovereignty

The concept of sovereignty can transform the way we think about development. In our food, water, energy and climate nexus course, we discuss how a focus on sovereignty disrupts current approaches to these resources. Relatedly, what is the role of development actors in supporting sovereignty? In the food module, we read a report about the history of the Diné [Navajo] food system (2014). This report provides a historical overview of how Diné food systems were violently destroyed through colonialism and the strategies that people are taking to reclaim traditional foods and reduce dependency on broken Western systems.



Research Ethics

In our classroom, we discuss the history of violent extraction of data from indigenous people and more ethical ways to pursue research following principles such as accountability, relationality, transparency, accountability. One good reading here is Tynan (2024) “Data Collection Versus Knowledge Theft: Relational Accountability and the Research Ethics of Indigenous Knowledges”. The [Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession \(OCAP\)](#) framework provides normative principles governing how First Nations data and information will be collected, protected, used and shared. It is a useful tool for researchers working towards data sovereignty. In the classroom, we have had some lively discussions about the differences between an indigenous framework like OCAP and the academic Institutional Review Board (IRB) required for University research. A final resource for having rich cross-cultural debates on research ethics is the case study: [Zerby, Nancy. 2014. “The Islanders and the Scientists: Post-tsunami Aid in the Nicobars.”](#)



See also: [The Ugly History of Research and Colonialism](#)



See also: [Voice](#)



See also: [Ethical Research](#)



See also: [Just Give Money to the Poor](#)

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

What if, When People Have Agency and Choice, They Don't Do What We (Development Practitioners) Want Them To?

This is a really practical question in community led-development that raises a lot of interesting debate. Providing some concrete scenarios or generating these from within the groups' experience can be useful to help guide discussion. For example, a community might adhere to cultural or social norms that contradict human rights principles, a group may choose technologies that are not feasible, or someone may spend grant money in ways that are not sanctioned by the project. In these cases what should the ethical development practitioner do?

Donor Resistance

Bureaucratic processes, such as procurement and contracting, also restrict the ability of local actors to compete for external funding. Although there has been a push for a localization

agenda, the majority of aid money continues to flow back to the donor countries, and most major donors are reluctant to give up control over how their funds are used and trust local actors. Highlighting the effective work of organizations like KCDF, discussed above, shows one example of how local organizations can “shift the power.”

Aid Dependence vs. Autonomy

While many community organizations seek autonomy, they are also stuck in a system with significant resource disparities and need to depend on external donors. International aid provides crucial support, but also creates dependency that undermines the local economy. Dambisa Moyo’s book, Dead Aid, (2009) does a compelling job describing the problems with aid dependency and provokes rich discussion.

Focus on Economic Growth

The larger aid system is fixated on economic growth as the main indicator of success for countries, communities and households. Standard measurements of success and change over time are based on economic indicators. In contrast, decolonizing development advocates for a more holistic approach that includes social, cultural, and environmental well-being. Donors may not be able to justify programming that is outside of their mandate of economic growth.

LO7: (Understand/Analyze/Act on) creative ideas outside of the current system/structures in order to imagine alternative and more positive futures.

Decolonial and critical perspectives of development studies often leave students feeling frustrated, hopeless and disillusioned about development (Sultana 2019, Schwittay 2021). Paulo Friere (1994) proposes that a stubborn hope is a necessary foundation for action and struggle and some recent publications provide useful guidance for adding a radical or critical hope to the development studies classroom (Sultana 2019, Schwittay 2021, Murray and Daley 2023). Schwittay (2021) recommends a critical-creative pedagogy that does not abandon critique but complements it with creative production to imagine alternative responses. It inspires students not only to tear down but also to rebuild in radical new ways - and to experience their own ability to do so. A recent book by Murrey and Daley (2023) considers a range of “post-development” practices and case studies that include social movements, resistance to “development projects, indigenous sovereignty, South-South cooperation, networks of direct aid, alternative geographical imaginaries, social media as an alternative public sphere, and the philosophies of de-growth, *buen vivir*, and *ubuntu*.” Another entry point is exploring emancipatory political and social struggles around the world (Laing 2021) to discover how decolonization can move beyond a “metaphor” (Tuck and Yang 2012).

LO7 is valuable at different depths. While one might spend an entire course having students imagine a more equitable global energy system, for example, it is also worthwhile doing this activity episodically, for 20 minutes in small groups in class, relating it to the topic at hand. In every case, encourage students to suspend their critical voices and imagine what could be

possible. The more concretely they think through those possibilities, the more they exercise what adrienne marie brown describes as a transformative process of “future casting and future thinking, aligning ourselves into the future, exploring and playing with how we’re going to get there” (brown, 2015 interview).

APPLICATIONS



Imagining Alternatives to Global Development Institutions

In our intro class, students are often feeling quite disillusioned after discussing the power relations and decision making dynamics of the World Bank, IMF, and WTO. We end the class with a unit on more equitable and effective development models. We discuss some alternative ideas including the degrowth movement, *buen vivir*, Amartya Sen’s “Development as Freedom”, the World Social Forum, South-South development cooperation, basic income experiments (cash transfers) and aid effectiveness policies. Murrey and Daley (2023), [Learning disobedience: Decolonizing development studies](#) is a useful resource here. The point is to open everyone’s mind to how development might be done in a very different way. Afterwards, we introduce an activity where students imagine an alternative global organization that would be more effective or equitable than those in the status quo. In small groups students develop their ideas on Google Jam boards and think about the details of the system such as goals, funding, decision making, scope/issues, approaches, power to intervene, etc. Students present and share their ideas and together we reflect how we felt during this activity as well as concrete ways of working towards their visions. It can be useful to weave in ideas from the [Global Partnership of Effective Development Co-operation](#) and the aid effectiveness agendas developed in [Paris \(2005\)](#), [Accra \(2008\)](#), and [Busan \(2011\)](#) and USAID’s [localization strategy](#).



Successful Development Organizations

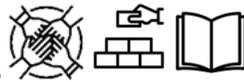
Students bring in examples of organizations or projects that they think are effective or successful within a given development sector. It is usually more instructive for students to focus on more local organizations about which they have more knowledge (and which avoids the problem of everyone picking Oxfam or another large institution). Students present their examples and reflect on why they feel the organization is successful. As a group we discuss the elements of successful organizations. Another, simpler, discussion prompt is to imagine you have \$1000 dollars to give to a development organization. Which organization would you give to and why?

Ethical Research



Shawn Wilson’s inspiring and thought-provoking book [Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods](#) about research from an indigenous perspective is a great resource for a class. He presents a decolonizing framework for research that focuses on spaces of resistance and hope, self-determination and cultural and ethical protocols. We particularly recommend Chapter 5 on Relational Accountability, which outlines a different way of thinking about research focused on trust and relationships.

Two-Eyed Seeing and Weaving Knowledges



The University of Winnipeg MDP program as a whole centers indigenous worldviews. As one student from that program comments: “our program is filled with ways of challenging colonialism, racism, sexism, structural violence and oppression within development through solutions grounded in community and Indigenous worldviews. When such radical changes are not allowed by power structures, [Etuaptmumk](#) (two-eyed seeing) can be a great tool to consolidate worldviews collaboratively.” An aligned weaving framework provides a useful metaphor for combining Indigenous and Western worldviews together in a mutually respectful way. [The website](#) “Weaving Ways of Knowing for the Environment” provides a platform for “learning, knowledge sharing, collaborating, and capacity building for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous environmental professionals interested in weaving knowledge systems in their environmental work.” It offers additional resources and useful case studies that show how knowledge systems have been respectfully woven together. Another great resource for understanding how to ethically and respectfully engage with indigenous senses and sensibilities is “Towards Braiding,” by Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti with Sharon Stein (2019). This reading can be accompanied by handouts for organizations that want to include indigenous people, knowledge or voices found on the website [Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures](#).

Poetry



Art adds an emotional layer to any topic, and is one of the most useful ways to inspire change and articulate a vision of a better world. And surprisingly, the idea of poetry as powerful and legitimate within our classroom has always seemed to be intuitively obvious to all of our students, regardless of cultural background. Our Leadership course (see LO8, below) uses poetry as a launch to the term: every student writes an “I Am” poem to (re-)introduce themselves through this other, creative voice. A poem called “Decolonial Love: A poem of love, perseverance and resurgence” by the Bermudian writer Zachary Myers is highly recommended. Chelsea Nicole Bannatyne, a participant at the KCDD, who identifies with her mixed Anishinaabe ancestry introduced us to this poem and facilitated a discussion around its emotional impact. She writes, “Poetry in particular is quite powerful in its ability to capture and

communicate a message to the reader. I really appreciate the unapologetic and graphic descriptions found within many works that speak on loss, injustice, love and violence, within I see beyond all the pain but the great courage, strength and vulnerability to share such experiences of heartache, devastation and tragedy. Poems and the play on words and use of language is remarkable for the emotions it can evoke. I am touched by those that give a sense of hope and uplift the spirits of those who share in similar experiences.” Students could be encouraged to bring a piece of art, music or poetry into the classroom that has inspired them or provoked them to see things differently.



Music List

In Murrey and Daley’s (2023), book: [Learning disobedience: Decolonizing Development Studies](#), there is an impressive playlist of decolonial and anti-colonial songs from around the world.



Preserving History and Culture in Colorado. Author: Joie Ha (Regis MDP alumna)

The [Colorado Asian Pacific United Organization](#) utilizes unique approaches to uncover and amplify little known Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander stories (AANHPIs) in Colorado. These stories have been silenced and suppressed by decades of discrimination, forced relocation, and the destruction of the historical communities. One example of the organization’s work is a collaboration with Denver’s Historic Chinatown families to document, preserve, and elevate the stories of the Historic Chinatown that no longer exists. This collaboration resulted in three historical markers, two murals, a documentary, and an official apology from the Denver Mayor (the first of its kind outside of California). The organization has also been collecting oral histories from the business owners and community members’ of Denver’s Little Saigon and directly using their input for the preferred method of story sharing.

“Community organizing, place making and oral history are effective strategies for uncovering and celebrating the stories of marginalized groups that have been ignored or covered up by society.” – Joie Ha, MDP alumna

African Leadership University (ALU). Author: Arnaud Doricyusa Nibaruta (Regis MDP alumnus)



Mission-centered learning is a concept developed by the [African Leadership University](#) to achieve its objective of creating a generation of ethical and entrepreneurial leaders for Africa. Following this approach, students, instead of declaring majors, are supported to define, refine, and implement missions that solve a certain problem in their community, their country, or the continent. The journey starts by introducing the students to PICS (Passion, Interest, Causes, Skills) and the Learning Processes (know what you know, and what you don't know, and how you will work to know what you don't know). At the same time, students are introduced to the [Grand Challenges and Great Opportunities for Africa](#) to help them frame their mission statements. By the end of their degree journey, students already have an idea of a problem they want to solve and many have already started working on the solution. This creates more intentionality in career choice and the impact students want to make. The mission-centered learning model has been practiced by ALU since 2017 and it has produced some amazing alumni, some of which are highlighted in the [ALU Impact Report 2023](#).

“How can you integrate a stronger sense of personal and collective mission into education and development work?” – Arnaud Nibaruta, MDP alumnus

Alternative Paths Forward



Have students research communities, social movements or activists who strive towards alternative values, ways of living, and goals. A few useful resources for exploring these alternatives are the website [Global Tapestry of Alternatives](#), and Kothari et. al.'s book, [Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary](#). This book celebrates the broad range of alternatives to Western development and calls for a “tapestry of alternatives,” or a co-existence and entanglement of multiple words, knowledges, and ways of relating to each other and the non-human world. I have students read the introduction to the book (pgs. xxi-xxxv) and choose one transformative initiative or principle to research more and share with class. Alongside this, we always like to present the case for *degrowth*, which usually generates some critical discussion. Chapter 8 of Murrey and Daley's 2024 book, offers a clear description of degrowth as does this podcast: [Degrowth: why some economists think abandoning growth is the only way to save the planet](#).

See also: [Pluriversal Thinking](#) 

See also: [Power of Unity and Connection](#) 

See also: [Just Give Money to the Poor](#) 

See also: [Research Ethics](#) 

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

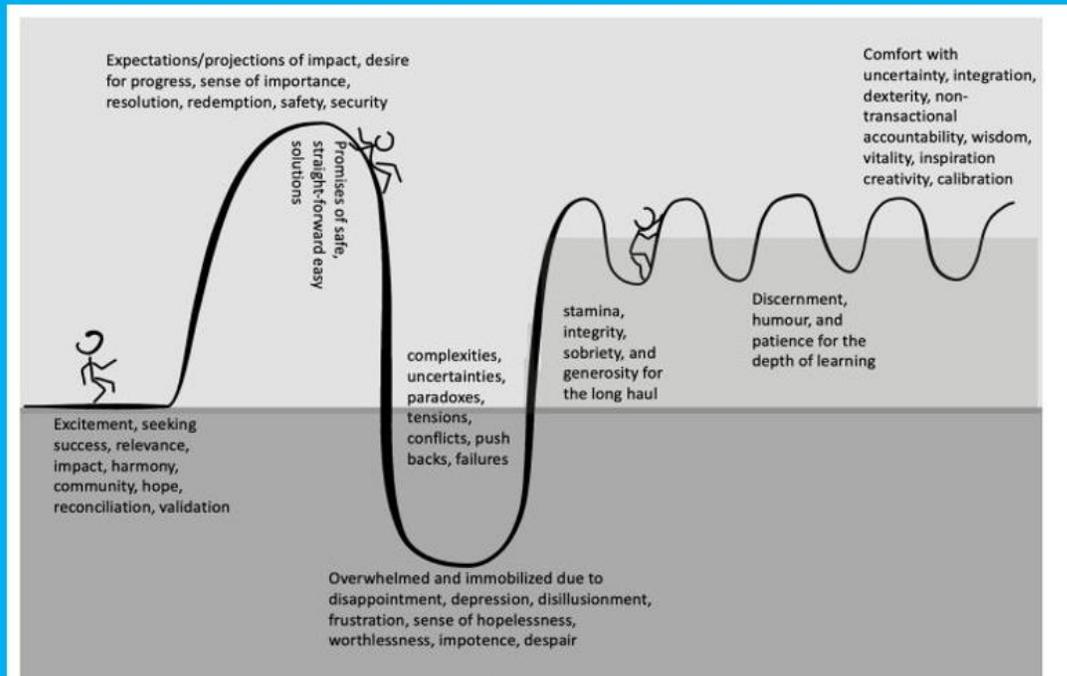
“This is Not Realistic”

In our experience students often leave these discussions and activities about alternatives feeling initially uplifted and energetic, but then conclude that the idea is unrealistic. Usually, however, the ideas are not as far-fetched as they might seem. To ground the activities, we encourage students to find examples of alternative ways of living and relating to each other and the environment in their own lives. They are usually surprised at what they notice when they do this exercise.

Arc of Disillusionment

Students come into the program full of the promise that they are on a straight path to acquiring the skills to join a world of powerful agents of great development. What we have learned over the course of building our program is that, as they begin to learn about the realities of development history, with its undeniable messiness around impact and even ethics, a period of disillusionment is inevitable for most students. A certain amount of this is quite healthy, for obvious reasons. But then our job is to help our students get to a place of sadder-but-wiser determination to do better, to learn from the past and re-focus on the goal of greater equity and human flourishing. The main way we do this is through focusing our major assignments on practical applications of theory. Practice breaks students out of abstraction – which is inherently passive, for most - and lets them feel their agency within real communities, addressing concrete problems. This lived sense of being and doing in the world seems to be more powerful than any argument for optimism in general, a fact that speaks to the necessity and power of addressing emotional realities as an integral part of technical education.

Another strategy we use is to let our students in on the typical journey they will experience. This graphic from Andreotti et al is helpful:



From *Developing Stamina for Decolonizing Higher Education: A Workbook for Non-Indigenous People* (2021. Andreotti et al, Gesturing Toward Decolonial Futures Collective.)

Students can see that they are moving toward emotional maturity borne of professional sophistication. Still, living with the stark injustices of the world is hard, and we know it is also important to have a ready ear for those – usually the least directly engaged in practice - who are struggling.

LO8: (Understand the importance of, analyze how to, Act to) develop an open and flexible mind that strives for reflection, continuous learning and critical questioning.

This learning objective represents a main goal of education, and is especially critical for development practitioners. From the start of our program we try to instill these skills and values by creating space for students to discuss hard topics together. We also introduce alternative ideas and theories that challenge students' worldviews. Decolonizing the mind through unlearning one's privilege, unconscious biases and cultural conditioning is a crucial starting place for decoloniality. Critical development scholars urge development students and practitioners to challenge and unlearn received wisdoms, assumptions, and 'facts' about development (Andreotti 2010, Murray and Daley 2023). While many students come into our

program with critical mindsets, they are often stubbornly attached to Western notions of development. We hope that students leave every class with a shift in their thinking and reconsider their pre-established ideas about development. We try to complement critical perspectives with an open and flexible mindset motivated towards action. When possible, we follow the Freirean cycle of critical thinking, reflection and action in classroom activities. This often takes place in a single class as the experience of our students shortens the gap between critical thinking and action and/or allows students to reflect on and critique their past experiences. This learning objective is closely related to [PD2](#).

APPLICATIONS

Capstone

All of our students complete a Capstone project in the final year of their MDP. Although it has the usual academic function of demonstrating student knowledge of curriculum content, the Regis MDP Capstone is distinguished by its future orientation – the fully developed framework for a project the student will (or could, or has already begun to) execute in the real world. Students lead with their own contextually-driven passions and commitments in deciding their topics. Accordingly, the projects are quite various in focus, from digital literacy for immigrant populations to menstrual hygiene management for unhoused people to solar enterprise development for rural women. The Capstone is embedded in learning processes and feedback mechanisms. Over the year students iteratively adjust their program as they work on their literature review and needs assessment. They receive feedback, not only from an advisor and a faculty or outside expert reader, but also from their peers at the Capstone Community Forum, our rethinking of the conventional Master’s defense. Framed as yet another opportunity for the continuous learning that is core to Regis MDP and decolonial philosophy, the Community Forum is a space of critical engagement as well as celebration and support for the presenting student and their Capstone project.

Leadership Course

In our program, we define leadership as a set of capacities that supports creativity, self-care and professional thriving in one’s team and oneself. Fundamentally, development practitioners need to ground their work in self-awareness and transformation if they are to effectively approach communities with those same aims. These capacities are implicit across our curriculum but explicitly targeted in a leadership course that we teach as a continuous workshop based in journaling, individual goal setting, self-awareness and peer-to-peer learning. We stress that self-reflexivity is an essential quality for decolonizing development practice. A core enabling tool in this respect is the Enneagram personality typology, which our students greatly appreciate for the objective vocabulary it gives them to understand themselves as a complex work in progress. We focus heavily on the human process (the How) over the

technical product (the What) as the space where colonial realities can be shifted over time. The Learning Objectives for our leadership course are: 1. Students will acquire habits and skills of self-reflection and analysis for continuous improvement of their practice 2. Students develop a resourceful approach to maximizing the value of any development situation for themselves and key stakeholders. 3. Students develop their concept of authentic leadership and integrate it into their professional identity and development practice 4. Students develop leadership capacity through practicing the skills of storytelling, asking good questions, identifying assumptions, engaging human hearts and creativity, peer coaching, and group facilitation.



Pluriversal Thinking

Western knowledge systems and scientific knowledge can be quite limiting, while considering pluriversal knowledges can help us see and do development differently. Kothari et. al.'s, [Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary](#) is a useful resource for this topic. Pluriversal thinking calls on us to be aware of where our knowledge or approach to development comes from and to expand our perspectives by listening to different perspectives and voices. This concept can be generativity combined with [two eyed-seeing and weaving knowledges](#). Thinking through a particular case study based on an indigenous perspective such as *buen vivir* or *ubuntu* shifts the goals and approach of a program and can be a useful exercise.



Questioning Knowledge Production

When we introduce a theory or reading in class we discuss where the knowledge comes from and whom it benefits. Instilling this questioning as a regular habit is a critical skill for global practitioners. Some questions that are useful in this analysis are: Who is the author and how does their identity affect their perspective? What expertise do they have on this topic? What assumptions does the author rely on? Why was this particular perspective published over others? How was the data collected? Whose voices are missing from this theory? What might be some other ways of knowing about this topic? A good reading on this topic is Kagal, Neha & Lia Latchford. 2020. "Towards an intersectional praxis in international development: What can the sector learn from Black feminists located in the global North?" This reading provokes reflection on who we learn from, and how we learn in international development, calling for global practitioners to learn from Black feminists in the global North.



Personal Learning

In our research and learning class students develop a personal learning approach, where they make a strategy for staying current in their field, sharing learning, increasing their network, and documenting their learning. As a group we collect and share relevant blogs, journal articles, conferences, LinkedIn or Facebook pages, and email listservs for staying up to date in the field. As many students are interested in searching for a new job, we hold additional workshops devoted to how to network, search for jobs, write a resume/CV, and build a LinkedIn page.

Organizational Learning

There has been a recent emphasis on organizational learning in international development and more jobs posted that include learning as a core responsibility. There are also new resources for helping organizations create a learning culture and develop processes for capturing, documenting and sharing learnings within monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL) or collaboration, learning and adaptation (CLA) frameworks. We created a simplified organizational learning culture climate survey for students to take in class and discuss in small groups. (It was based on these longer established assessments by [Mercy Corps](#) and [USAID](#)). Some good guiding discussion questions for this survey are: Which of these areas does your organization do well, and why? Which do they do poorly and why? What processes, systems, incentives would help your organization improve in these areas?

Theory of Change

Theory of change is an important tool in our program because it pushes practitioners to be clear about how and why a particular intervention will bring about expected results, and to lay bare the assumptions behind this logic for interrogation and adjustment, if necessary. It is central to our capstone planning class, and becomes a way for students to continually adapt their proposed programming as they do their literature review and community data collection. Teaching theory of change, we show several examples sourced from previous Capstones or established development programs. Together we work through a case study of a program that aims to install handpumps to empower women. As a group we discuss the logic, evidence, and assumptions of this project. We also developed a template that is useful in helping students break down the different components and dynamics of a theory of change.

Adaptive Management

Adaptive management is about creating space and flexibility in the project cycle to respond to new information. This is an important principle for putting into practice theory of change and organizational learning. In class, we discuss the critical learning points in a project cycle and the importance of adaptive management for making use of these learnings. USAID's learning lab and [Global Learning for Adaptive Management](#) (GLAM) offer useful case studies, toolkits, resources, frameworks, learning briefs, and podcasts.

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Preservation of the Status Quo

As one of our alumni said, “Even when I bring in new ideas that I know will make things better, leadership doesn’t listen.” It can be really tough for students when the leadership or status quo way of doing things will not evolve, take in feedback or adjust to new realities. For ideas to move beyond stagnation and the emotional burdens it brings, see LO7 applications and [feeling of hopelessness](#).

LO9: (Understand how to, Analyze how to, Act to) collaborate and partner with people, from a solidarity perspective, owning your role/knowledge, and respecting the role, knowledge, agency of other team and community members.

This learning objective builds from a practitioner’s critical self-awareness and a recognition of the agency, skills, and dignity of the people they work with. It requires people to reflect on their role, and when and how they should help, and when they should let others lead. Key to this learning objective is a strengths-based approach that respects the resourcefulness and vision of community members, finding ways to support their goals and processes, and encouraging their self-reliance. We challenge our students to think about how solidarity can be practiced in their everyday lives and development activities. Transformative solidarity does not assume similarity and self-interest, or mutual benefits, it honestly faces power imbalances, and refuses simple solutions (Murrey and Daley 2023). Solidarity between the North and South should be based on respect, healing, and acknowledging and challenging the power imbalances perpetrated through colonialism and imperialism (Murrey and Daley 2023). This learning objective overlaps with LO2 and LO6, and many of those applications would be useful here.

APPLICATIONS

Stakeholder Analysis

Understanding the power and relationships that exist among stakeholders—anyone who has a stake in a given situation—to any project is a prerequisite for designing programs that are responsive to the actual people we seek to serve. There are a variety of tools to help analyze and understand the needs of stakeholders. One that we have used in our participatory planning class is useful for identifying stakeholders based on the level of their power and interest in a problem or proposal. This approach enables students to consider goal and objective setting as well as how to plan for sufficient resources and communications activities to develop strong engagement of diverse stakeholder groups. Our tool is developed and extended from Making Collaboration Work (Strauss 2002). Students start from and adapt the grid below and discuss how to work with and manage relations with each type of stakeholder—

High Power/High Interest, Low Power/High Interest, High Power/Low Interest and Low Power/Low Interest.

Stakeholder Group Categories:

- High Power/High Interest
Those with formal power to make a decision.
- High Power/Low Interest
Those with power to block a decision.
- Low Power/High Interest
Those affected by a decision.
- Low Power/Low Interest
Those who may have relevant information or expertise.

Our students learn to consider power and interest as a normal dynamic in which they prioritize managing those who have the power to affect outcomes while they keep the most impacted well informed and engaged in order to strengthen their voices in development projects. Methods for deepening and expanding stakeholder analysis are explored throughout the program and stakeholder analysis is required in the Capstone.



Personal Responsibility and Activism



A core principle of activism is that a person needs to understand their own roots and self before they can assist others. We try to instill in our students a sense of personal responsibility based on their implications in webs of production, consumption, economy and trade. While we frame individual action from a perspective that recognizes and aims to transform the larger structures of inequality, starting in a personal way provides students time and structure to reflect on their history, culture and family. We help students consider what paths of action are available depending on their time, energy, resources, capacities and the political context they operate within.

In our Grassroots and Indigenous Activism class, students learn about civic and community activism and connect this to their work in the development field. One of our students was working under an international agency. In her professional capacity, her responsibility was to implement program activities—some of which were adversely affecting the people they were designed to assist. Taking an inventory of what she could do, she met with the stakeholders, heard their concerns and helped them to map out a positive path to advocate for themselves.

As a result, the international program met with these constituents and initiated changes to its approach.



Knowing Your Role in the Group

In the classroom, the skill of recognizing one's role and supporting others can be practiced with group projects. At the start of a project, we ask students to reflect on (and discuss with their group) their experiences and strengths as well as the areas in which they are trying to grow and where their blind spots and weaknesses are in the context of the project. Starting a classroom (or development) project with this type of discussion helps make the team more effective and efficient and allows people to reach their goals and support each other where needed.



Power of Unity and Connection

One common theme in our KCDD conference was the power of unity and connection across boundaries. Colonial divisions and borders continue to divide us, and neocolonial actors use divide and conquer tactics to keep people from working together for positive change. And in the classroom, the ethos of competition continues to dominate. The *ubuntu* principle of interdependence – “I am because you are, you are because of me” – made a strong impression on participants at the conference. Along with building the culture of learning in community, the classroom offers the possibility of studying examples of social movements that succeeded and grew through the power of unity.



Solidarity, Not Pity

We have good discussions in our classroom about how to practice solidarity and the difference between empathy and pity. A quote by the indigenous Australian activist and academic, Lilla Watson, provides a useful orientation for discussion: “If you’ve come here to help me you’re wasting your time, but if you’ve come here because your liberation is bound with mine, let us work together.” This quote offers much to unpack. As a follow-up, students provide examples of when they have seen or been part of work based on solidarity and empathy vs. expertise and pity and discuss how these different ways of working feel.



Give Money to the Poor

There are a variety of pathways for giving money to people without the restrictions, conditions and bureaucracy of most development programs including unrestricted grants, micro-financing, cash-transfers, universal basic income, and direct online giving to entrepreneurs. All of these modalities give people more agency and control over how they use the money. In class I like to discuss these examples: [India's social protection cash transfer program](#), [Kenya's universal basic](#)

[income experiment](#), [Kiva](#), and the [Grameen Bank](#). In small groups, students discuss the benefits and the downsides of the different models, what conditions are needed to make each successful, and how they might evaluate the program’s success.



Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting—where the citizen or stakeholder has a greater say in how resources are spent—has proven to give participants greater understanding of trade-offs and compromises while, at the same time, building their ownership and engagement in projects that impact their own development. While it has been applied in cities around the world it can become more of the norm even in the distribution of smaller budgets of NGOs or development-related companies. The case study of participatory budgeting in the city of São Paulo is a good starting point for understanding how to build and mobilize community discussions that reach marginalized populations often left out when it comes to resource allocation (Hernandez-Medina, 2010). A good resource for considering how to employ participatory budgeting more broadly is *Participatory Budgeting: adoption and transformation* (Wampler & Touchton, 2017).

In their own jobs, our students have experimented with finding and opening space for stakeholders to be more involved in how resources are budgeted. This has sometimes had surprising outcomes that point to wider applications. For example, an assistant soccer coach in the program convinced his university to engage the team in choosing the priorities for its discretionary budget. The immediate results were felt in the culture of the team itself, which became stronger and more enthusiastic to work together.

See also: [Strengths-Based Perspectives](#)



See also: [Shift Power to the Community: KCDF](#)



See also: [Nile River Role Play](#)



See also: [Building Trust Within Your Organization](#)



CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Ignoring Power Imbalances to Protect Group Unity

In our classroom we have to fight the tendency to avoid our differences and power imbalances and instead, push through any discomfort to acknowledge the nuanced realities each person

faces based on their positioning and intersectional identities. This challenge and its implications can be openly discussed, and framed historically by looking at social movements, such as the civil rights movement in the United States, where sexism was often pushed aside to unite people around fighting racism.

Donor Priorities

Although many practitioners would like to work in solidarity with communities, following community initiative around approaches and goals, pressure from donors to accomplish particular objectives within prescribed timelines makes this challenging. In class we share examples about how this challenge plays out and discuss tactics for navigating donors while keeping solidarity with the community.

See also: [What if, when people have agency and choice, they don't do what we \(as development practitioners\) want them to?](#)

LO10: Understand/analyze/act to consider the environment as foundational to human thriving and an active agent in development work.

The natural environment is the foundation of development, and it shapes our culture, identity and way of living. Colonialism has not just exploited people, but also the environment. The water, air, soil, animals, and plants have suffered violence in the name of development, and continue to suffer in the ruthless drive to increase profits and prosperity. The natural resources of the poor are often stolen by foreign corporations and countries, while at the same time the waste and pollution generated by development disproportionately affect their communities. Indigenous perspectives of human thriving, such as *buen vivir*, reject a dualism between society and nature and extend rights to the non-human, recognizing that plants, animals, ecosystems and spirits have their own will and feelings (Gudynas 2011). Centering and giving voice to the non-human is a valuable exercise in development that pushes us to think beyond the instrumental pragmatism of neoliberalism and see sustainability both more holistically and more realistically, in context of our finite planetary existence.

This is the newest of our LOs, just added in 2024. Arguably, this LO is the most disruptive of status quo, colonial, assumptions about power, value and the very meaning of development. As a teaching tool, it can truly open up new pathways of critical reflection and alternative aspiration because it stands as an explicit invitation to push beyond our current, (Northern)human-centered social arrangements.

APPLICATIONS



Model UN Role Playing with Environmental Stakeholders

In this role-playing activity, created by participants at the KCDD conference, seven small groups are assigned to take the subject positions of air, land, water, flora, fauna, the Global South or the Global North. The groups get 15 minutes to brainstorm around two questions: 1) How is development impacting you and what are your most pressing issues? 2) What actions would you like any of the other groups to take to improve your well-being? Each group gets a chance to speak for themselves, in the voice of their stakeholder. In a second round, groups can respond to each other. Afterwards, we encourage a group discussion that reflects on the activity, starting from what people felt and learned. When we did this activity, our speakers were incredibly passionate and creative in conveying their feelings, and we all developed a new empathy for how each of the environmental elements are currently experiencing development. We reflected on the agency of nature, and how it is always speaking to us even if we don't listen. This activity also provoked a good discussion about how we can elevate the voices of the environment in development work.



Indigenous Perspectives of the Environment

In our intro class we present the class with the concept of *buen vivir* and we discuss how this perspective could change the way development is approached. An accessible description of *buen vivir* to inform this discussion can be found in: Gudynas, Eduardo. 2011. *Buen Vivir: Today's Tomorrow*. A beautiful video called "[The Sacred Relationship](#)" illustrates how the Cree indigenous group of Alberta relates to water. Another great case study is the Standing Rock Sioux fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Students can be assigned to research the history of this protest and the solidarity practiced by non-Sioux groups in this struggle.



Legal Rights for Rivers

In class we share examples of recent legislation that has recognized rivers in New Zealand and India as living human entities entitled to protection. Then we discuss, starting from the question, What are the implications of this growing movement for development work? A great short video documenting the Maori's fight for personhood for the Whanganui River in New Zealand is [here](#).



Feminism, Justice, and the Environment

In our gender class, we discuss the links between patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and environmental exploitation. Eco-feminists, such as Vandana Shiva, advocate for addressing

gender inequalities alongside environmental injustices. Three resources we like for this classroom discussion are: 1) Acha, Majandra Rodriguez. “Climate Justice Must Be Anti-Patriarchal or it Will Not Be Systemic.” 2) Manning, Susan M. 2016. “Intersectionality in resource extraction. A case study of sexual violence at the Porgera mine in Papua New Guinea.” 3) A short video where [Vandana Shiva](#), explains how she sees patriarchy, capitalism and sexism as inter-connected, primarily focused on the Indian context. Some guiding questions to unpack these resources are: How are the systems of patriarchy, racism, and capitalism interconnected? What does this practically mean for development work? What does a feminist perspective contribute to environmentally-related development work?

Systems Perspective on Food, Water, Energy and Climate

In our class we adopt a systems perspective to examine the links between food, water, energy and climate. In small groups, students discuss three case studies as they move through the class: fracking on the Navajo Nation; oil contamination in Thar Jath, South Sudan, and the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile River. Students describe and illustrate the nexus linkages for these case studies using [casual loop diagrams in Kumu](#).

See also: [Pluriversal Thinking](#) 

See also: [Nile River Role Play](#) 

See also: [Walk the Land](#) 

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Climate anxiety

Many of our students feel an overwhelming sense of anxiety about climate and the environment - what we call eco-anxiety. Educators in general have not done a great job finding an outlet for these emotions of despair in our classrooms; our instinct is to shield our students (and ourselves) by alternating between hyper-rational analysis and false optimism. Our commitment to LO 10 led us to seek a more realistic and productive response to this very real emotion.

A significant obstacle to moving past superficial and deflecting responses is the conventional role of the instructor as all-knowing and all-protecting. Working together to reckon with our

own emotions first allowed us to make space for those of our students. Rather than solutions, we set our sights on letting students feel validated and supported, and dispelling the additional fear they might hold that we (and our generation) were simply in denial. We trusted that processing and sharing fear and despair could help our students feel less alone and might also motivate action.

We decided on an activity that could foster the sense of connection to nature that is the prerequisite to a genuine commitment to fighting for its well-being, thereby grounding students in their context and opening up the possibility of action. The activity was simply for every student to identify a natural feature in their everyday world – a tree, a water body, a particular bird species – and track it over the course of a semester, visiting it multiple times in a week and journaling their observations of its life. This individualized activity would be supported by regular, brief, sharing in class from students' journals.

As a faculty, we found Skilling et al, "Navigating Hope and Despair in Sustainability Education: a Reflexive Roadmap for Being with Eco-anxiety in the Classroom" (2022) to be a quite helpful starting point. For those who are able to give the issue sustained attention, there is wonderful guidance from ecological practitioners such as [Joanna Macy](#).

Disparate realities of climate change

Everyone is feeling the impacts of climate change in some way, but those ways can be very different. In our diverse classroom, some of our students are experiencing climate change in the form of catastrophic assaults on their immediate environment while others have the privilege to detach, turn off the news or insulate themselves from the effects. This can make climate-related classroom topics difficult to navigate. We strive to create trust so that everyone feels they can speak from their position and lived experience without adding to their anxiety, guilt or fear. This is unavoidably perilous terrain, but students being able to rely on a degree of honesty and vulnerability from their instructor is a promising foundation.

4. Assessment

Rigorous assessment at different levels has enabled us to refine and evolve our MDP program. The ten decolonized learning objectives (DecLOs) that structure this handbook also guide our assessment. We created a rating system for our DecLOs loosely modeled on Bloom's taxonomy whereby each can be met at three graduated levels: 1) Understand, 2) Analyze, 3) Act on. This rating system is applied to individual courses, student Capstones, our program as a whole, and to alumni professional development practice. Each of these domains is discussed below.

Assessment is a lot of work, so we advise being selective in choosing an assessment framework, based upon your resources and goals. For example, it may be possible to include a few additional questions in your existing end-of-class surveys for each of the DecLO's you are

interested in pursuing without too much extra effort. Bringing all faculty together to do some type of programmatic assessment has the added value of gaining their creative and critical input, as well as buy-in for future modifications that might need to be made. Evaluating a summative assignment is also a relatively efficient way of understanding the strengths and weaknesses of your program. Alumni tracking surveys provide a sense for how well aligned your program's pedagogies and curriculum are with the jobs alumni are working in.

Program level evaluation

At the MDP program level, we used the DecLO's to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our curriculum. During annual faculty workshops, we introduced the question of how to decolonize our curriculum, our courses, our teaching and our assignments. Faculty assessed their reading lists and identified which DecLO's their courses were strong in and how they met these objectives (via discussion, readings, assignments, etc.). Given the formative nature of our inquiry and goals, we asked faculty to provide ratings of the potential of their teaching activities and assignments to achieve each of the DecLOs alongside the actual extent to which they believed they were currently achieving them.

Analyzing these data across our program, we found the best-achieved DecLO across the curriculum was #9 –Work in collaboration and partnership with people, owning your role/knowledge, and respecting the role/knowledge of other team members. Reflecting the tension between our emphasis on pragmatism and our aspiration for transformation of the status quo, the DecLO with the least capacity for achievement within the current curriculum was #7 –Think outside current structures/systems in order to imagine different futures. The DecLO's with the greatest potential for growth were #2, #3, #6, and #7. During our annual Faculty Workshops in 2023, we discussed and shared strategies for better achieving DecLO #7.

Capstone evaluation

The Capstone is the cumulative project our students engage in during their final year. It includes a literature review, needs assessment, theory of change, program design, and monitoring and evaluation plan. For more details about the Capstone [see here](#). As the Capstone brings together many skills and tools into a real-life development project that students choose and are passionate about - and very often execute - it makes sense to assess the final product using our DecLO's, particularly as the capstone represents a direct bridge between classroom and practice. Another key assignment could be used in programs without a Capstone. In fact, the decolonizing lens serves nicely to measure and shape any key assignment for its ability to assess this critical dimension of our teaching.

Student surveys

We have collected 449 responses from 47 anonymous end-of-class surveys since 2019. Our response rate for most classes is high as we typically spend 5-10 minutes on the last class to allow students to work on their surveys. These surveys measure key aspects of decolonizing the classroom including questions related to students' feeling that their experience and background is invited and respected in the classroom, that they belong, that they learn from their classmates, that they can question the course content, the professor and their peers, that they have a chance to reflect on power, that the material is relevant and useful to them, that they felt they could participate with their full selves. (The full survey is included in the appendix). The average scores across key categories are presented in the table below. Our scores have improved over time and we have collectively brainstormed how to boost our scores in areas where we were not initially as strong. The survey also included qualitative questions about which types of activities were most conducive to building connections and community, what activities, discussions or readings led to shifts in the students' perspectives, and students' overall assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the course. Some examples of *aha* moments where students' perspectives shifted include:

It was interesting to observe the perspectives around gender roles from some of the African male participants. Also, it was instructive to learn about the role of race in the African development field from a personal point of view from Rwandan and Kenyan colleagues.

I can't describe one particular experience where I was able to see something from a new perspective, because I feel that every class discussion that we have, I am able to see things from new perspectives. My cohort is experienced in the field of development all around the world, and I have a lot to learn from my classmates and I appreciate all of their different perspectives about various aspects of development - the experiences that they are living, working in, and their perspectives about all of the course content are valuable to my learning experience in this course. I love this cohort.

I feel that I had a lot of these moments - learning from other students and their perspectives always gives me valuable perspectives to pay attention to - also having Prof Mike [indigenous professor remotely teaching from Dine College on the Navajo Nation] in the course was awesome. His perspective on things made me make a lot of important connections and I feel like he always found a way to bring the lecture back to what is important in a personal sense - once he said something like "what can I give you because you are my brother" as opposed to "what am I owed because I exist" and he was always able to incorporate indigenous perspectives into the material and important things to keep in mind - the value of community and connection.

"Xxxxxx was my partner for my first community connections assignment and I learned a lot about her culture. The living conditions in Uganda, near the city of Kampala, are difficult and the current President of Uganda is more like a dictator. I was humbled learning about Xxxxxx's daily life, daily struggles, and most of all her strength and

resilience during these times. I continue to be inspired by my classmates through every opportunity that I have to work with them.”

These quotes give us a sense for where meaningful learning happens in our classroom. An analysis of the responses to this section shows that they mostly speak to transformative learning in conversations or group work where students engage with each other.

Average student responses from the end of the year surveys based on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly agree)

	N	Average
The professor offers a range of perspectives in the classroom	279	1.3
The professor allows for critical questioning in the classroom	441	1.35
My experience and background are invited and encourage in the classroom	449	1.26
I feel connected to my classmates	449	1.47
I feel that I can bring my full self into the classroom	446	1.30
I feel that everyone gets to participate in small and full group discussions	368	1.25
The class gave me a chance to reflect on how power manifests in development	366	1.30
I learned a lot from my classmates during this course	446	1.3
The material I learned in this class was relevant to my development practice	447	1.4

Alumni surveys

In surveys, alumni provide us with their perspectives on the usefulness of the MDP degree and explain how decolonization is relevant to their work. In total we collected 55 survey responses from 39 separate individuals (16 alumni answered the survey at two different times, and in these cases, we were interested in how their application of MDP skills and knowledge evolved over their career). The survey was sent out three times between 2022-2024, with at least six months between each round. The alumni who participated graduated from the MDP between 1-7 years from the time they took the survey.

When we asked alumni how much they utilize what they learned as an MDP in their current position, the average score was 3.7 out of 5. The average score of 4 represents using the MDP utilizing the MDP degree “a lot” (a score of 5 represents using it “a great deal”).

The tools, concepts and ideas that alumni reported using most frequently in their work were: 1) participatory planning techniques and tools, 2) research and data collection analysis, 3)

monitoring and evaluation, 4) theory of change, and 5) program design and project management. All other areas received fewer than five votes.

Several students had comments similar to this one: “Frankly, the aspect of the MDP that I use the most is more the overarching philosophy for approaching development and keeping in mind my role and positionality when engaging in the work with donors, field teams, or local stakeholders (ex. government officials). It guides how I approach my work, so it's hard to pinpoint a specific instance since it's always present.”

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6. Appendix

Strategies for teaching to and adapting academic norms

Scaffolded assignments: Students have far more opportunity to learn if they get feedback midway through (or at multiple stages of) an assignment. Break your major assignments down into component parts (smaller assignments), and let students get critical feedback on each of them so they may build toward a successful end product. In this way, the process and learning becomes as important as the final product.

Voice: Emphasize that you want to hear students' practitioner voices coming through in whatever they write; that they are always part of a community of learners and teachers, and that they are making real contributions to that community with every assignment. Don't let them fall into "academic imposter" syndrome, where they lose touch with their passion and experience as practitioners – and you lose touch with who they are and what they are trying to

do and say. This is particularly problematic in your interactions with international students, where both of you can get distracted with problems of “proper English,” losing sight of the substance of the assignment.

Articulated assumptions of your assignments: Do your best to make clear the purpose of any given assignment, including explaining the logic of each of its parts. This will require you to understand these things for yourself, perhaps in more detail than you have done before. If you find that an assignment or parts of it are pure academic formality, consider whether it/they are worth your time to teach, and your students’ time to learn.

Student ownership of standards: Wherever you can, find opportunities to give students ownership over the standards by which an assignment may be deemed a success. The foundational step is to tie every assignment to a real-world task or imperative; that is, every major assignment should be meaningful to the student beyond the classroom. As much as anything, the gravitas of the assignment signals respect for the student’s professionalism. Discuss criteria and let students contribute to shaping them. Use peer review (a workshop format is best) to let students see in each other’s work the impact of the assignment criteria and to experience themselves as exercising collegial support through upholding those criteria. Finally, let your grading reward improvement - and let students own and report on their own improvement. One option is to have them append a memo to submitted work, explaining what dimension of writing they particularly worked on.

Writing: Writing is hard for everyone and for most, it presents a lifelong process of improvement. In responding to written work, do your best to recognize the substance behind the writing. Mentor the substance and take it seriously - and thereby recognize the seriousness of the student. Coach the writing by focusing on just one or two elements for improvement at a time, knowing that that is as much as any writer will be able to take in and work on in a given stretch of time. Meantime, incentivize your students to make use of the university’s writing center.

Language: English is our official language of instruction, but for half of our students, it is their second, third or fourth language. We recognize that this presents challenges from a decolonizing perspective and a full participation goal. Since our program began, we have been working to improve the experience for students who do not communicate easily in English. We ensure that all students know how to access the university’s writing and tutoring centers, where they can receive one on one support. In class, we are deliberate about avoiding slang, shorthand and irony that might also leave some students behind. In small experiments where we have opened up space for students to speak in their own language, we found that this was a powerful experience for students, which allowed them a sense of ease and comfort and a more expansive and creative mindset. For example, inviting people to introduce themselves in their native language always brings smiles to the faces of the speaker and the listeners. It challenges the implicit superiority of English and welcomes multiple identities and heritages. In classrooms where there is a critical mass of students speaking a single language other than English, it can

be conducive for deeper learning for those students to have the opportunity to brainstorm a given topic together before moving to English in the general discussion.

In depth description of professional consultancy assignment

In our participatory planning class, we partner with a non-profit organization that is seeking technical assistance with a participatory plan for a particular project. Our students work together as a consultancy to analyze the situation and propose a plan for greater community engagement. In practice these organizations have been small- to medium-sized organizations based in Mexico, Pakistan, South Africa, Timor Leste and Uganda. All of these clients have reported implementing the plan they were presented with - especially impressive given that this course is only the second one the students take in the program.

How this has been prepared

Before the class begins, the instructor disseminates opportunities widely through alumni networks and listservs.

The instructor interviews and chooses an organization based on four criteria:

1. The organization has a clear need to expand stakeholder participation in its activities.
2. The organization is prepared to respond to and work with students in collecting data and helping them to understand its context and issues.
3. Participatory data collection approaches that can be used by the students promise to help understand the perspectives of stakeholders and chart a path forward.
4. The organization commits to use the plan delivered by students.

The instructor and the organization agree to a scope of work with specific deliverables in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that will be shared with the students.

How it is conducted

Students are informed in the first days of the class that they will need to prepare themselves to organize the class consulting project around the participatory tools they learn and the specific experience and skills each brings to the initiative. Students read the MOU and overview materials provided by the “client.” In some cases, the client has written a specific report on the status of its activities and the challenges it faces in developing greater participation. Some specific moments in the process:

- The client, often with staff and some of its stakeholders, presents its organization and the opportunities and challenges it faces to the students. (The timing needs to be as early as possible but generally comes around the third week of class.)

- Students are challenged to “organize themselves,” self-analyzing and communicating the specific skills that they bring to the project and deciding on roles and responsibilities.
 - Generally, there are one or two students who have more planning and execution experience who take the lead, although, in at least one case, students decided to give this role to a student who felt she needed to develop these skills.
 - Students invent or employ the tools they need for project management, set deadlines, and choose the data collection methods they will use.
 - Students work in small groups with regular communication with the organization to come up with a participatory plan.

- The tools students have used, while different in each project, have included stakeholder interviews, focus groups, staff interviews and tracking and monitoring of events and reports from the organization. Because of the nature of our program, all activities have been carried out at a distance, using internet technologies.

- Students prepare a draft report for the client and the client returns to the class to question, criticize and suggest improvements to the report. Students, then, produce a final report and submit it to the client.

- Grading from the assignment is a combination of
 - A group grade for how well the client rates the report and the quality of content and presentation.
 - An individual self-assessment reflection of each student’s contributions to the overall project and the role that they played.

How effective is the collaborative group project?

In our experience the group project has been very effective in preparing students to tackle the practical challenges of participatory planning. Almost universally, students rate the collaborative project as a high point in their development practice education.

Challenges and pitfalls

Challenges implicit in the group project are timing, expectations and the unequal contributions of students to the outcome.

- Timing – The total time is very short for the project. Factoring in that our students are often working full time jobs, they stress over meeting deadlines with clients and with the different responsibilities they each have. Given the global scope of the student body, it is also complicated to set up meetings and events—often requiring more participation of those students who are closer to the client in terms of time zones.

- Expectations—The expectation of producing a high quality, professional and usable product for a client is key to the increased engagement of students, since it is not viewed as an academic exercise. However, the challenge of understanding the challenges and contexts facing the client and coming up with solutions creates a fair amount of anxiety that must be managed by having constant access to the instructor.
- Unequal contributions—without exceptions there are always overachievers and slackers on the class team. In practice, students learn about their own approaches and how to succeed on a team where everyone is not equally engaged. The overachievers consider how they can promote greater leadership in their peers and the less engaged about how they can fully commit without committing to activities that they know they cannot complete.

Student end-of-class survey

Default Question Block

During this course, where did you primarily connect from?

- Denver, in the classroom
- Denver, not in the classroom
- In the USA, remotely
- Outside of the USA, remotely

Is English your first language?

- Yes
- No

The professor allowed for critical questioning of his/her presentation material.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

The professor created an environment where my experiences and opinions are invited and respected in the classroom.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

My professor was available to help me if I needed it.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

The professor provided a range of perspectives about the course topics.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

The professor presented material clearly.

Strongly agree

Somewhat agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Somewhat disagree

Strongly disagree

If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

The professor effectively challenged students.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

The professor effectively addressed student questions.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

I feel connected to others in this course.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

I trust others in this course.

- Strongly agree

- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

I feel accountable to my classmates.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

I feel that I belong in this program.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

I feel that my classmates are available to help me.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree

- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

I feel comfortable sharing my personal experiences in class.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

I feel comfortable debating my classmates' ideas in discussion.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

I feel that my culture and full self is welcome in the classroom.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

I feel that everyone has a chance to share and lead in small group discussions.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

I feel that a certain group of students dominate discussion in the full class.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

The course content and readings are relevant to my experience.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

This class gave me an opportunity to reflect on and question power structures in development.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

The assignments allow me to show what I learned about the topic.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

My classmates' perspectives have contributed positively to my own development practice.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

The material I learned in this course has/will positively affect my development practice.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

The main assignments effective in helping you understand and integrate the course content.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- If you would like to provide further information, click this choice and add your comments.

How has your understanding of the main course topics changed since the beginning of the course?

Which lectures/topics did you find most valuable to the course?

Which lectures/topics did you find least valuable to the course?

Which tools/concepts/ideas presented in the course did you find most valuable to your development practice?

Are there any topics you would have liked to learn more about or topics you think we did not cover but should have?

What activities, assignments, and/or discussions helped you to feel most connected to your classmates?

Please reflect back on the class and describe a time when your perspective changed or shifted (like an "aha" or breakthrough moment). What brought about this breakthrough?

My participation in class was limited by financial means. Please explain if you pick strongly agree or somewhat agree.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

My participation in class was limited by technology/internet. Please explain if you pick strongly agree or somewhat agree.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree

- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

My participation in class was limited for some other reason. If yes, please explain.

- Yes
- No

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