



Weaving worlds through community engagement: Telling stories of self for meaning-making in Thailand

Dane Emmerling¹, Alice Ammerman¹, William Pryor IV¹, Gina Difino¹, Callum Mackenzie²

Abstract

“Public Health, Entrepreneurship, and Food Systems in Thailand” exemplifies an innovative, ethically grounded, and academically rigorous approach to short-term education abroad. Students engage in interdisciplinary, community-based projects in partnership with Yunus Thailand, addressing public health and food system challenges while integrating experiential learning with critical reflection. The curriculum emphasizes inclusive and participatory design: students co-created engagement rubrics, scholarships removed barriers, and classroom practices honored diverse ways of knowing. Ethical engagement and reciprocity are foregrounded through the signature “Story of Self” assignment, which combines arts-based expression, spoken narrative, and collective witnessing to foster critical self-reflection, mutual vulnerability, and awareness of community impact. Continuous improvement is supported by iterative feedback from faculty, students, and community partners, informing both experiential and instructional components. By combining immersive engagement, structured reflection, and transdisciplinary learning, the program demonstrates how short-term education abroad can achieve transformative, inclusive, and ethically responsible educational outcomes.

Keywords

Critical reflection; community engagement; short-term education abroad; social entrepreneurship; transformative learning

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Public Health, Entrepreneurship, and Food Systems in Thailand is a four-week, faculty-led study abroad program (see Table 1). This program is rooted in a partnership between the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Yunus Thailand. Yunus Thailand was co-founded by Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Laureate who pioneered microfinance and the social business movement. In June 2025, 19 undergraduates travelled to Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Satun Province, engaging directly with community-based initiatives partnered with Yunus Thailand. In project teams, they worked alongside the organizational staff on public health and food system challenges that ranged from supporting an HIV clinic serving the transgender community, designing sustainable business models for a Muslim women-led seaweed farming initiative, and improving community health challenges for a waste picker community. Students visited the homes of women seaweed farmers, sat with healthcare staff, saw the impacts of vanishing U.S. aid, and learned alongside waste pickers while collecting recyclables. These experiences were preceded by intentional preparation, as we onboarded students through multiple pre-departure meetings and trainings at the start of the program interrogating preconceptions and offering practical support for navigating local customs and expectations. Preparation included a short Thai language course and guided discussions on cultural humility that prepared students to navigate gender norms, religious expectations, poverty, and healthcare and food access.

TABLE (1)

COURSE PROFILE

Course or Program Title and Numbers	SPHG429H: Public Health, Entrepreneurship, and Food Systems in Thailand
Content Focus, Field, or Discipline	Public health, food systems, and social entrepreneurship
Credit-Bearing	Yes
Program Level	Undergraduate
Program Duration	Short-term
Onsite Locations	Bangkok, Thailand; Chiang Rai, Thailand; Satun Province, Thailand
Program Leader(s)/ Course Developer(s):	Dane Emmerling; Alice Ammerman; William Pryor IV; Gina Difino; Callum Mackenzie

Our primary learning objectives were (1) to work in interdisciplinary project teams to support Yunus Thailand and their community partners in developing design-thinking social business solutions to public health and food system challenges and (2) to reflect critically, collectively, and actionably with peers and local collaborators. These objectives drew on the global learning and civic engagement frameworks, challenging students to integrate knowledge and develop a sense of leadership across classroom, community, and experiential settings, critically engage cultural and social difference, and connect local experiences in Thailand to broader global systems of health, equity, and sustainability. The first objective was assessed through final presentations delivered to the Yunus staff and UNC Chapel Hill professors, with students receiving feedback from faculty and community partners, positioning the community partners as co-educators shaping curriculum and evaluation. The second objective was assessed through structured reflection assignments, including weekly journals, facilitated group reflection sessions, and two Stories of Self. These reflective artifacts were evaluated to gauge the degree to which students recognized and articulated their developing sense of leadership and positionality, as well as their ability to publicly narrate what they were learning about themselves and about public health, social entrepreneurship, and food system challenges and possibilities in Thailand.

Learning was intentionally designed to flow across settings: classroom discussions provided theoretical grounding, site visits revealed lived realities of public health and food systems, internships and projects engaged students directly with Thai community partners, and reflection sessions allowed students to conceptualize their thoughts in preparation for returning to the community with more informed ideas and practices. This continuity helped students integrate diverse ways of knowing while also grappling with contradictions and discomfort inherent in global engagement. Students spent time in Bangkok as well as in northern and southern provinces, where they visited grassroots social enterprises, NGOs, and entrepreneurs. The course introduced students to social entrepreneurship and design thinking while supporting them in developing solutions to problems identified by our community partners. Reflection was woven throughout the course through facilitated group sessions, guided reflection journals, and two Story of Self assignments informed by Megan Boler's pedagogy of discomfort (1999).

To enhance reflection and assess transformation, our signature assignment invited each student to craft and perform two Stories of Self—one at the start of the program and one at the end—drawing on Marshall Ganz's public narrative framework (2023). Students shared through spoken essays and art how their personal experiences and values led them to the program and how those shifted through encounters with Thai collaborators, communities, and

each other. They connected these insights to broader social concerns and publicly articulated the commitments they intended to carry forward.

As part of a larger research project with IRB approval on reflection in education abroad, we analyzed students' essays, art, journals, and transcripts from reflection sessions and exit interviews. Findings revealed that students moved through the emotional stages of transformative learning together: initial disorientation in confronting inequities and privilege gave way, through critical, collective, and arts-based reflection and storytelling, to new understandings of leadership, community, discomfort, and reflection itself.

What makes this curriculum stand out within the field of education abroad is its approach to reflection and reciprocity; it exemplifies innovation and creativity by elevating transdisciplinary teaching and learning in what we teach (public health, entrepreneurship, food systems) and how we facilitate it (public narrative, collective witnessing, arts-based practice). Too often, reflection assignments in education abroad curriculum are treated as a solitary process: a journal entry, an online forum or blog post, a private positionality paper. Our teaching team sees transformation as a relational process. Through the use of public narrative (Ganz et al., 2023) and collective witnessing (Boler, 1999), we offered an alternative model for education abroad instructors: one that foregrounds reflection as collective, critical, and actionable. The Story of Self assignment invited students to reflect through writing and arts-based expressions: many incorporated photography, sketching, poetry, and music into their reflective narratives. Sharing these stories aloud with the full cohort transformed the reflection process into a public act of meaning-making and mutual vulnerability, as the teaching team also wrote and performed their own Stories of Self alongside students. Each presentation was followed by open dialogue: peers and faculty offered affirmations and probing questions, which helped students deepen their reflections and recognize the ethical dimensions of representing self and community. In addition, the teaching team met individually with students in coaching sessions prior to their presentations, offering feedback and discussing how they wanted to represent their identities, relationships with the Thai community, and the learning they gained from the program. To support students with re-entry, the "Story of Self" assignment was explicitly designed to be shared not just in Thailand, but back home with family, friends, strangers, and future employers. We hosted a resume workshop to help students articulate the impact of the experience professionally and will organize a reunion for students to come together to further build community and reflect on the impact of the experience personally.

Further, as students grappled with the generosity and hospitality they received from Thai partners, the assignment created space to consider questions of reciprocity. Having such a close partnership with Yunus Thailand, several

students extended their time in Thailand to intern with Yunus Thailand and one of our university partners for an additional month. To model this on an institutional level, we are proud that UNC Chapel Hill will soon launch a Yunus Center on campus this Fall, cementing a sustained research partnership by leveraging university resources in service of Yunus Thailand year-round.

Our commitment to inclusion shaped every part of the curriculum and program design. Thoughtful recruitment led to over half of our students coming from historically underrepresented backgrounds in education abroad. We awarded scholarships and worked to eliminate logistical and financial barriers. In the classroom, we co-created a student-generated participation rubric that redefined classroom engagement by centering presence, vulnerability, and listening over traditional participation metrics. We made communal decisions about how to engage with discomfort, honor differences, and interact with our host community and one another. This participatory approach to inclusive pedagogy encouraged welcoming, vulnerable, and challenging dialogue from the very first day. In order to attend to continuous quality improvement, the participation rubric was revisited multiple times to guide peer and faculty assessment, hold everyone accountable, and inform adjustments to instruction, group dynamics, and experiential activities.

A core component of our program's design was a systematic approach to evaluating student learning and continuously improving both didactic and experiential components. During group reflection sessions, the teaching team explicitly solicited students' candid feedback on frustrations and received actionable suggestions that were implemented in real time. Parallel to student assessment, the teaching team held regular meetings with CPO staff to mutually share observations and feedback, aligning on what was working, what could be improved, and how experiential activities were supporting both learning outcomes and community needs.

At the close of our program in Thailand, students gathered in a café in Bangkok to present their final Stories of Self. One by one, they stood before their peers, sharing their personal stories of uncertainty, transformation, and new commitments. This culminating class period resembled a closing ceremony rather than a typical final classroom presentation. There were tears, laughter, long pauses, and applause over the course of four hours. One student closed their reflection by saying they now felt more peaceful in moments of disorientation and their desire to continue returning to discomfort as a site of learning. Another shared their plan to maintain the meaningful relationships they built with their cohort and our Thai community partners. What struck us most were how their reflections were no longer about "Thailand" per se, but about who they were becoming and how they might live differently back home. This shift illustrates the global learning framework in action, as students

connected their local experiences abroad to broader systems and commitments that shape their roles as global citizens. It is precisely this kind of critical, collective, and actionable reflection that we believe redefines what is possible within short-term education abroad programming.

References

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- Ganz, M., Lee Cunningham, J., Ben Ezer, I., & Segura, A. (2023). Crafting public narrative to enable collective action: A pedagogy for leadership development. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 22(2), 169–190.
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List of Supplemental Materials

- Suppl. 1: [Course Syllabus](#)
Suppl. 2: [Signature Assignment](#)
Suppl. 3: [Itinerary](#)
Suppl. 4: [Student Course Artifacts](#)

Author Biography

Dane Emmerling is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Behavior at UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health focused on program evaluation, teaching, and participatory research. Dane’s pedagogy is centered on the process of sociopolitical development through which individuals increase their analytic skills and capacity to build a healthier and more just world. He researches and evaluates critical consciousness raising interventions, or experiences and programs that shift individuals’ and institutions’ attitudes and behaviors about their participation in systems. Before UNC, Dane worked in global health evaluation and in service-learning offices supporting universities linkages with community organizations.

Alice Ammerman is interested in design, testing, implementation and dissemination of innovative clinical and community-based nutrition and physical activity interventions for chronic disease risk reduction in low-income populations. She is Director of the UNC Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (HPDP), part of a national network of 26 CDC prevention research centers (PRCs) that work with community partners to identify public health problems to develop and evaluate prevention-focused public health interventions for wide dissemination. Her research addresses the role of sustainable food systems in health, the environment, and economic well-being, emphasizing the social determinants of health, particularly food access and food insecurity. She has a developing interest in Culinary Medicine to improve

medical training programs and uses social entrepreneurship as a sustainable approach to addressing public health concerns.

William Pryor IV, M.Ed. is a doctoral student, educator, and researcher at UNC-Chapel Hill. His work centers on community-engaged experiential learning and the design of educational experiences that connect students with local and global communities. He is interested in creating reciprocal partnerships that benefit both learners and community stakeholders. Prior to his doctoral studies, he spent four years teaching in K–12 schools, where he developed a passion for learning that extends beyond the classroom.

Gina Difino, MA, is an international educator with Honors Carolina at UNC-Chapel Hill. She seeks to connect faculty and students to partners and opportunities abroad that facilitate mutual understanding in facing the world's great problems thoughtfully. She has worked in education from kindergarten through executives and is passionate about intercultural and experiential learning. She holds a bachelor's degree in anthropology from Grinnell College and a master's degree in international education from SIT Graduate Institute.

Callum Mackenzie is a social business leader who has pioneered innovations across multiple sectors, implemented projects across +10 countries, and worked with social impact organizations, governments, international organizations, and corporations. He is experienced in building and leading purpose-driven, multicultural, and entrepreneurial teams, while he teaches social entrepreneurship and leadership at universities around the world.