

# Culturally Conscious Assessment as Pedagogy in Study Abroad: A Case Study of the Higher Education in the Ghanaian Context Program

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## Abstract

The Higher Education in the Ghanaian Context (HEGC!) study abroad program was created to engage participants in a critical examination of concepts related to power, privilege, and oppression within higher education settings in Ghana and the United States. The course has three components: pre-immersion, immersion, and emersion that are guided by a central question: What can this experience teach me about contributing to a global society through the application of culturally conscious practices in my field? To answer this question, HEGC! faculty incorporate culturally conscious pedagogy and assessment presented in this paper. The authors use a case study of the pedagogical and assessment approach for HEGC! as a form of assessment as pedagogy. This paper will provide an overview of the HEGC! study abroad program and the culturally conscious pedagogy and assessment strategies used. This paper concludes with implications for study abroad and assessment practices as well as intersubjective reflections from the authors.

## Keywords:

Africa, study abroad, decolonization, higher education, assessment, culturally conscious

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## Introduction

Sankofa, more specifically San (to return)-Ko (go)- Fa (look, seek, take), is an Adinkra symbol derived from the Akan language of Ghana that means “to return to the past to bring the lessons that will inform the future”. Sankofa is an especially poignant symbol that helps

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to frame the complex and interconnected history between the United States and Ghana. Broadly, this relationship has provided evidence of how Eurocentric and western education systems undervalue local and indigenous knowledge from the Global South (e.g. disenfranchised, minoritized, and periphery countries). Global histories of colonialism and exploitation continue to placate and undermine the necessity of traditional and indigenous knowledge in the current development of Ghanaian institutions of higher learning. The Higher Education in the Ghanaian Context (HEGC!) study abroad program is a concentrated effort to elevate the work of decolonization within student affairs and higher education. Sankofa has and continues to be a way to acknowledge a problematic past and seek new ways to center traditional and indigenous knowledge from Ghanaian colleagues and partners as higher education practitioners envision new possibilities for institutions of higher learning (Temple, 2010).

The HEGC! program in 2018 as a short-term study abroad program offered during the winter term at the University of Maryland, College Park, USA. The program includes three primary components – pre-immersion, immersion, and emersion – designed to center Ghanaian history, culture, and knowledge through the study of higher education institutions. HEGC! participants are graduate students, faculty, and practitioners in higher education who are seeking to learn more about the field of study with the context and culture of Ghana. For many of the participants, HEGC! is the first time they are engaging with higher education outside of the United States context and go through a process of reframing and relearning throughout the program. HEGC! faculty created the program to expand the scope of social justice work in higher education and expose participants to the often overlooked formal and cultural knowledge present in West Africa (Moore & Martin, 2019). In addition, the program impetus was to look beyond ideals of the Global North (e.g., privileged, centered, and powerful countries) on social justice education, decenter whiteness, decolonize educational practices, and engage participants in a critical examination of concepts related to power, privilege, and oppression.

In order to understand participant learning through the program components, HEGC! incorporates various assessment techniques to understand how participants are learning throughout the program including reflections and project-based learning. Central to the HEGC! faculty and participants has been the incorporation of assessment results into the pedagogy for the class. In using assessment as pedagogy, program faculty can be *in conversation* with participants about their individual and group learning throughout the program. In particular, assessment as pedagogy provides a lens for how participants are processing learning about Ghanaian culture and higher education. In order to both teach and assess in this environment, the HEGC! faculty used *critical conscious pedagogy* and *critical conscious assessment* to guide the assessment as pedagogy approach.

The authors of this paper represent both program faculty (Martin & Moore) and former participants (Foley & McDermid) who utilize Black feminist thought, intersubjectivity, emergent theory, decolonization, and relationality as a conceptual framework to interrogate the use of assessment as pedagogy for the HEGC! program. This case study provides several implications for practice regarding assessment-driven pedagogy and study abroad practices. We present in this paper a case study for the use of assessment as pedagogy including an overview of the HEGC! Program, assessment strategies used, and pedagogical incorporation for the course.

## Case Study Approach

Case study strategy allows researchers to focus on one or a few instances associated with a social phenomenon (Babbie, 2007; Nash, 2011). Therefore, it allows us to study a program, event, activity, process, or one or more participants in depth (Pierce, 2011). Case study strategy offers us a unique approach to gaining a better understanding of real people in real situations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Pierce, 2011). The authors contend that their use of Black feminism serves as the basis for their case study. Using Black feminism affective love-politics (Nash, 2011), this case is bounded by focusing on the pedagogical approach of the HEGC! study abroad program as the unit of analysis. In this paper, the authors operationalize Black feminism affective love-politics by centering it in the genealogy of affect intellectual theory.

The “affective turn” in critical theory (Staiger, Cvetkovich, and Reynolds 2010, p. 5) has produced a rich body of scholarship invested in “public feelings,” in the ways that “global politics and history manifest themselves at the level of lived affective experience” (Cvetkovich 2007, p. 461). This work problematizes the boundaries between private and public and draws intimate connections between the subjective and the social, between the emotional and the political. (Nash, 2011, p. 4)

Black feminism affect love-politics applies to the case study strategy used in this paper because “Black feminism’s recurring interest in love can be interpreted as an advocacy of a particular kind of self-work, one that encourages the Black feminist subject to transcend the self” (Nash, 2011, p.7). The HEGC! study abroad program is the exemplar case of co-constructing knowledge and strengthening the relationship between faculty and students to experience Black feminism affective politics.

The faculty designed the HEGC! program to incorporate *culturally conscious pedagogy* throughout the course, which combines elements of chieftaincy, culturally relevant pedagogy, and empowerment evaluation to guide program participants learning (Boakye-Yiadom, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1992;1995; Fetterman, 2007). In order to assess participants’ growth through the program, faculty primarily use *culturally conscious assessment* guided by the above framework and implemented it through participant reflections and project-based learning. Program faculty do not ask students to engage in comparing the Ghanaian context to the United States context, rather they facilitate student learning around a central question for the class: ***What can this experience teach me about contributing to a global society through the application of culturally conscious practices in my field?***

## Program Overview

Specifically, the HEGC! program focuses on the role of student affairs and services in the context of Ghanaian higher education with attention to the sociohistorical relationship between the United States and Ghana. The program frames this relationship through the lens of decolonization and decentering whiteness. Decolonization calls attention to the structures, practices, policies, and paradigms that uphold colonial legacies (Boidin, Cohen & Grosfoguel, 2012; Patel, 2016). These legacies are particularly prevalent between the United States and Ghana given the history of colonialism, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and liberation from the British empire shared between these countries. HEGC! calls attention to these legacies, how coloniality shapes higher education, and how the

development of higher education reifies these systems (Poloma & Szelényi, 2019). One means through which these legacies advance are through the centering of whiteness in knowledge production, dissemination, and authority. Conceptually, whiteness is “a social construction” (Thompson, 2008, p. 1) that takes on many forms – material, discursive, institutions, personal/relational – upon which all other cultures are compared. HEGC! faculty frame course material to center Ghanaian culture and the local knowledge that contributes to higher education as a method to decenter whiteness in participant’s learning journey.

## HEGC! Pedagogical Statement & Philosophy

For the HEGC! study abroad course, the pedagogy utilized a collaborative, co-constructive approach where the faculty center the context of Ghana, decenter whiteness and Western approaches to study abroad education, and use participants’ reflections as the basis through which they learn.

The HEGC! pedagogical statement is as follows:

In December 2015, we participated in the Ghana Study Abroad in Education (GSAE!) program with Dr. Cynthia Dillard at the University of Georgia as faculty co-facilitator and participant, respectively. It was an eye-opening and life-changing opportunity to work with participants, faculty, and educators in Ghana throughout the duration of the study abroad program. This program has blossomed into a book project in collaboration with the program faculty and participants, highlighting the importance of study abroad programs in West Africa and the impacts of knowledge gained from the experience. The Higher Education in Ghana Study Abroad (HEGC!) program is in direct response to call for more collaborative programs between higher education in Ghana and the U.S. (Dillard, Author, & Means, n.d.).

We are constantly concerned with the educational environment for which we help to foster in and out of the classroom with participants. We approach our work with care and intentionality. Our general goal is for us to co-construct knowledge and gain understanding as it relates concepts of oppression, privilege, gender, race, social class, spirituality/religious practices, environmental press, resistance theory, constructionism, and critical theory during this class. Within this goal, we hope to decenter notions of the Western world as the site for best and promising practices in student affairs and higher education. The central question throughout the HEGC! experience will be: What can this experience teach me about contributing to a global society through the application of culturally conscious practices in my field?

As we journey throughout the HEGC! program, we strongly encourage you to lean into your story of resistance. We will develop a challenging and supporting educational environment, focused on promoting the development of a social justice orientation to work in higher education. This classroom (physical and symbolic) is a safe space and you will be expected to hold this space for fellow colleagues during this course.

Our expectations of participants are high; we expect your best. As a participant, you can expect the best of us. Each class will focus essentially on the application of the principles, concepts, theories, and other information gleaned from the readings. In-class time may not always be directed towards deconstructing each individual reading; instead, we will examine the linkages and/or themes across the reading and

conducting analyses of content and its application in the context of higher education and student affairs. Therefore, your personal and active involvement in the process is essential for your successful completion of this course.

We are sincerely looking forward to engaging in this developmental journey with you.

In creating this study abroad experience, the faculty drew from a couple of perspectives as a guide. First, HEGC! pedagogy is influenced by hooks' (2014) and Dillard's (2006a; 2012) writings and how they centered their experiences as Black women in the academy and how they taught toward liberation. First, the HEGC! Faculty have known each other for a number of years and have built the relationship on shared conceptions of spirituality, excitement, trust, creativity, curiosity, and laughter (Dillard 2006a; hooks, 2014). It is in the HEGC! faculty's relationality that the HEGC! program came into existence when the faculty authors participated in a short-term study abroad program in education to Ghana in 2015. From that initial experience, the faculty also wanted to decenter the white-western hegemony that is ubiquitous in higher education scholarship as well as center different perspectives in a post-liberation context. As the program began to crystallize, the need to create a pedagogy that created learning environments built around concepts of critical scholarship, community, and reflections was critical.

Second, the faculty centered participants' communal reflections and experiences of "hearing one another's voices...recognizing one another's presence" (hooks, 2014, p. 8). This centering is the foundation of the HEGC! learning experience drawing on the connecting points between participants' and faculty experiences. In this way, HEGC! faculty participants create a "community of love" (Dillard, 2006a, p. 37).

Third, the pedagogy leaned heavily on participants' engaging in reflection as a means through which they could document their growth and learning. In this way, participants could move from seeking knowledge from an objective stance into incorporating knowledge as part of multiple ways of knowing (hooks, 2014). Further, the faculty evoke reflection and personal narratives as a means through which participants can articulate their paradigms around what it means to be educators contributing to a global society (Dillard, 2006b).

Fourth, participants' engagement with the readings, discussions, and experiences transformed the experience of the faculty (hooks, 2014). HEGC! faculty are able to see across the short-term study abroad experiences that participants were beginning to expand their views about the purposes and promises of education. Further, for every year of the program, the learning elements through the perspectives of participants were evident by incorporating assessment as pedagogy throughout the course.

Guiding HEGC! is a central question: ***What can this experience teach me about contributing to a global society through the application of culturally conscious practices in my field?*** This question has a two-fold purpose. First, the central question gives participants a tool through which they could frame what they were learning, not just in terms of problems, but in terms of possibility. In this way, they followed de Sousa Santos' (2015) in his assertion that "our problems are practical, our questions productive" (p. 16). Rather than having participants wrestle with the tension of learning new information within a new context alone, the central question and participants' reflection and discussion of this question relate and are productive to the learning process. Second, the central

question called the program participants toward a critical need to connect their practice to the global. In this second reasoning, the goal of HEGC! was not to make participants global leaders, but rather to call attention to the need to contextualize practice to the localities rather than think about a global *best practice* that disregarded cultural elements to privilege the Western context as universal. To answer this question, participants engage in readings, reflections, and a culminating project-based learning group project in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA) at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) in Ghana who coordinate the recruitment of university project partners. The program takes the form through a 3-credit course divided into three components: pre-immersion, immersion, and emersion.

### Pre-immersion Component

HEGC! is a short-term study abroad program that occurs in the winter term at the University of Maryland, College Park, USA. Before the in-country or immersion portion of the program in January, participants attend three class sessions in November and December. During these class sessions, program faculty and guest speakers introduce and orient participants to the history, culture, and structure of higher education within the Ghanaian context as well as the study abroad program. In terms of assignments, participants complete a pre-immersion reflection about their initial assumptions on the Ghanaian context and individual learning expectations for the program. Participants also begin preparatory work for the project-based learning assignment by meeting virtually with their university project partners, completing a summary of decolonizing student affairs/higher education practice, and creating an outline for their project-based learning.

### Immersion Component

In January, the immersion or in-country component takes place over the span of ten to twelve days. Participants engage with historical and cultural sites through the cities of Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast. Across these cities, program faculty and participants visit four universities: University of Ghana, Legon, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, University of Cape Coast and Ashesi University. At the universities, program faculty and participants engage with faculty, students, and staff to learn about the teaching, learning and research practices at the universities with particular attention to how Ghanaian culture informs these practices. For example, at the University of Ghana, Legon, faculty and students with the Department of Dance introduce participants to drumming culture by faculty and students. In addition to receiving and practicing a drumming demonstration, participants learn about the history of drumming within the Ghanaian culture and the importance of preserving the artistic and cultural heritage as part of the educational experience within Ghanaian higher education. At the University of Cape Coast, participants engage with their project partners as well as in a colloquium with other students, faculty, and staff of IEPA in discussions related to their projects. Information exchanged during the colloquium is key to laying a foundation and informing the work of the collective project and course symposium. Though the structure has varied over the years, the colloquium continues to serve the purpose of providing a space for participants from the U.S. and Ghana to share their knowledge, experiences, and ideas. Over the years, this space has also served as a think tank and a place of shared knowledge and intersubjective dialogue (Moore & Martin, 2017).

During the immersion component, participants engage in daily written reflections and group debriefs. Participants work with UCC and IEPA project partners on building

upon the outlines for their projects and engaging in literature reviews, interviews, document reviews, and other information gathering mechanisms to support their project aims. In addition to the daily written reflections, participants prepare speaking points and questions for the colloquium and work on an expanded outline based on their information gathering during the immersion component.

## Emersion Component

The pre-immersion and the immersion sections of the course prepare participants for their collective final project and the final symposium with the University of Cape Coast (UCC)/ Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (IEPA) project partners. The emersion component has two elements: two emersion classes and the final symposium. During the emersion class sessions, participants reflect upon the immersion experience and their re-adjustment to the United States context. In addition, participants use the time to prepare for the final symposium. The symposium is a public scholarship presentation where participants present their final presentations in conversation with their university project partners. This symposium also provides the opportunity for participants to reflect on and share how Ghana called participants and changed and informed their perspectives as global leaders in their respective fields of study such as student affairs, higher education, language and literacy, and urban education. The symposium provides a space to culminate participants' learning experiences and the implications of the collaboration with the UCC/IEPA partners. Through this, knowledge is shared and gained and collaboration with Ghanaian partners is strengthened. The assignments for the emersion component include a emersion reflection paper, a group symposium presentation, and a final group paper that accompanies the presentation.

As discussed, the HEGC! program incorporates a number of elements that the faculty use to assess participant learning throughout the program. The assessment methods used throughout the program tie directly to the pedagogical approach of the faculty and are used throughout the course for improving the learning experience of the participants.

## Assessment Framework for Higher Education in the Ghanaian Context (HEGC!)

Within the context of higher education in the United States, assessment for learning is "...the process by which teachers use assessment evidence to inform their teaching, and 'assessment of learning' refers to the use of assessment to determine the extent to which participants have achieved intended learning outcomes" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 553). This is an important framing in order to situate together rather than as separate and distinct elements of the teaching and learning process (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Still, this definition of teaching, the role of educators and the associated outcomes from learning are widely informed by and center whiteness as the valued epistemological foundation for knowledge acquisition and transfer (Grey & Williams-Farrier, 2017; Moore, Boakye-Yiadom, Martin, Stone, & Lanahan, *in press*). Through the lens of HEGC!, assessment as pedagogy is realized through three dimensions (1) decolonizing learning, (2) employing culturally conscious pedagogy, and (3) decentering whiteness in learning assessments that is termed as *culturally conscious assessment*.

## Decolonizing Learning

Decolonizing learning serves as an antiracist education strategy. In order to decolonize learning, there must be a radical transformation of how knowledge is acquired and transferred in society (Patel, 2016; Moore, Boakye-Yiadom, Martin, Stone, & Lanahan, *in press*). Instructors are in relation to the communities they are teaching in and the content they are using to facilitate participants' learning (hooks, 2014; Patel, 2016; Grey & Williams-Farrier, 2017). As such, HEGC! faculty are building sustainable relationships with the participants as part of the co-learning process given the immersive and short-term nature of the program.

Black feminist thought calls on educators to transform dominant notions of educational spaces to reimagined environments of radical change and knowledge production. Black feminist thought "...applies specifically to the experiences of Black women in the academy and our continuing struggle to secure safe spaces that allow Black women to tell and validate their stories to and for each other" (Grey & Williams-Farrier, 2017, p. 507). While "...intersubjectivity (Husserl, 1969; Peräkylä, 2008) emphasizes the shared cognition and consensus between individuals to co-construct reality" (Maddox, 2011, p. 22), Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000) allows scholars and educators to highlight how transformative theory which pushes the bounds of knowledge—names that knowledge is situated within a particular culture and between cultures (Maddox, 2011). Therefore, scholars and educators should employ a multidimensional perspective to research and pedagogy. The pedagogy applied to the study abroad class explores the betweenness of culture and learning—where participants and teachers are learning through conversations and co-creating knowledge with each other.

### Culturally Conscious Pedagogy

Black and Wiliam (1998) denoted, "... any examination of pedagogy that does not take into account the various kinds of assessment processes that are used in educational settings – or does not explicitly analyze such processes as assessment – can at best provide only a partial explanation of what is going on" (p. 555). Chieftaincy, culturally relevant pedagogy, empowerment evaluation framework, and action research conceptually inform the definition of culturally conscious pedagogy and practice.

**Chieftaincy.** The ancient governing practice of chieftaincy is richly rooted in Ghanaian culture, ontology, and epistemology. Often informed by various Indigenous knowledge, Ghanaian culture serves as the foundation for the HEGC! pedagogical approach — a lens for which to employ decolonizing practices and approaches to instruction. Chieftaincy focuses on service within the community as "custodians of communal lands and natural resources" (Boakye-Yiadom, 2012, p. 30). Moreover, the society holds chiefs responsible for using these resources for the building up of their towns and villages. Chieftaincy incorporates the role of nobility, inclusive of characteristics like selflessness, integrity, rank, and virtue (Aidoo, 1977; Boakye-Yiadom, 2012). Finally, chieftaincy draws on consultation with valued members in the community—chiefs engage in participatory decision-making processes (Obeng, 1986; Yankah, 1995; Boakye-Yiadom, 2012). Chieftaincy is featured in the program faculty's instruction methods and the collaborative nature of the course design with Ghanaian faculty and administrators, the study abroad participants, and course faculty.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.** Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) embodies valuing multiple ways of knowing. While this framework initially focused on employing culturally inclusive teaching approaches on K-12 education level (Ladson-Billings,



1992;1995), the theoretical frame also incorporates higher education curricular and co-curricular spaces (Slee, 2010). “Primarily, CRP requires educators to challenge the educational outcomes of normative culture by using culturally relevant approaches throughout the curriculum (Gay, 2010), allowing for a more critically conscious and inclusive educational environment” (Moore, Boakye-Yiadom, Martin, Stone, & Lanahan, *in press*). The program faculty use this frame to uncover the multiple ways of knowing that can be employed the program. For example, the HEGC! curriculum primarily centers knowledge that is transmitted in a classroom or other structured setting. During HEGC!, however, program faculty intentionally invite students to learn from and ask questions during unstructured setting as well – when program faculty and participants are in the marketplace negotiating for items, in conversations with the lecturers at the historical and cultural sites, and in getting to know the in-country coordinator and driver who accompanies the program faculty and participants. The participants’ reflections demonstrate how this pedagogy impacts their learning in that they see the context from multiple perspectives, not just from class sessions or in conversations at universities.

**Empowerment Evaluation.** Colleges are educating a more pluralist and global population and require reshaped practices of evaluation—recognizing the importance of local knowledge derived from participants, faculty, and staff. The empowerment evaluation approach includes self-evaluation and provides specific communities with the knowledge and tools needed to establish, develop, monitor, and evaluate their performance (Fetterman, 2007; Donaldson, 2017; Moore, Boakye-Yiadom, Martin, Stone, & Lanahan, *in press*). Additionally, the community creates their shared approach to the evaluation process—allowing them to implement the evaluation, review the results, buy into the evaluation process, and trust the results (Fetterman, 2005). Through the practice of culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusive program assessment/evaluation practices with Ghanaian colleagues and study abroad participants, the principles of empowerment evaluation were quite applicable to real-world settings (Moore, Boakye-Yiadom, Martin, Stone, & Lanahan, *in press*).

**Action Research.** Similar to empowerment evaluation, action research employs a process of reflection which allows for a shared commitment to the research and associated results between community members and their collaborators (Lewin 1946; Sagor, 2000). Additionally, action research employs research tools and real-world practical examples to the scholarship process—allowing educators and participants to focus on problems they have identified as target areas for themselves (Sagor 2000; Watts 1985). A central tenet of action research is collaboration between colleagues which increases professional development (Watts, 1985). The program’s collaboration with Ghanaian higher education faculty and practitioners directly incorporated the tenets of action research and empowerment evaluation (Moore, Boakye-Yiadom, Martin, Stone, & Lanahan, *in press*). The project-based learning in the course is an excellent example of incorporating action research as part of the assessment framework for the course. Participants begin working with the university project partners as part of the pre-immersion component. During their conversations through the symposium, university project partners are identifying needs and priorities that connect the participants to the context of Ghanaian higher education. The conversations allow for the participants and university partners to collaborate on innovative approaches to the identified needs.

Decentering Whiteness in Learning Assessments

A central tenet of the course and associated outcomes is the focus on decentering whiteness as an ideological and pedagogical framework for the curriculum. Poloma & Szelényi (2019) examine three conceptualizations of African higher education, (1) U.S. coloniality of knowledge, (2) indigeneity, and (3) hybridity and critical hybridity. United States coloniality features values and validates Western and American knowledge, which influences African higher education. Indigeneity, on the other hand, highlights the value in maintaining ingenious practices and culture. Cultural hybridity refers to combining elements of African and U.S. cultural norms, knowledge, values, and practices (Poloma & Szelényi, 2019). Cultural hybridity provides a platform by which to support the study abroad program's efforts to decenter whiteness in the assessments and pedagogy. Rather than relying solely on knowledge from the Global North or local knowledge using only elements from indigenous cultures, cultural hybridity offers fluidity of thought. The course instructors posit that there is not an arrival place that learning will accomplish; rather there is an interconnectedness of these frameworks or ways of thinking and knowing which inform how a person comes to know. The study abroad program asks participants to go back and forth through varying ways of knowing.

## Assessment as Pedagogy in HEGC!

For HEGC!, assessment is a means to be in conversations with participants about their experiences learning about the Ghanaian context and how they were seeing their practice through this new lens. This conversation was in the form of reflections completed throughout the program, class discussions during the pre and immersion components, and debriefs during the immersion component. In these reflections, faculty are looking to understand how participants are understanding elements of the cultural context inclusive of how they understand the structure of Ghanaian higher education. Faculty use information from these reflections in the class sessions and debriefs to address issues or emphasize understanding for individuals and the group. At the beginning of the program, participants write a summary of decolonizing practices in student affairs and higher education practice, which faculty expect to be considered and infused throughout the course with the central question and in the final project. Through this assessment, faculty are assessing how participants incorporate decolonizing practices and decentering whiteness approaches in their collaboration with university project partners. Finally, the culminating project that students build across the program incorporates elements of empowerment evaluation and action research where they listen to identified needs and/or priorities with the project and collaborate *with* the university project partners to create deliverables to the project partner related to those needs. In order to illustrate assessment as a pedagogical approach, Adinkra symbols and proverbs serve as an important guide.

## Culturally Conscious Assessment as Pedagogy Approach

Adinkra symbols provide an excellent framing for the assessment as a pedagogical approach for the HEGC! study abroad program. Willis (1998) summarizes the origin of Adinkra symbols:

The word *Adinkra* comprises three parts. The word *di* means 'to make use of' or 'to employ.' *Nkra* means 'message' and the *a* is the Akan prefix of an abstract noun. Together *di* and *nkra* mean 'to part, be separated, to leave one another, or to say good-bye.' In the word *Adinkra*, *nkra* means the intelligence or message that each individual soul takes with [them] from God on departing from earth (Kra is the Twi

word for 'the soul.')

*Thus Adinkra implies a message a soul takes along when leaving the earth, hence the expression 'saying goodbye to one another when parting' (p. 28).*

Originally, these symbols were stamped onto cloths worn by families during funeral proceedings to honor deceased loved ones. In addition to this use, Adinkra symbols are used throughout Ghanaian cultures in building motifs, advertising brands, and decorations. In the Ghanaian culture, these symbols “reflect traditional mores and specific communal values, philosophical concepts, codes of conduct, and the social standards of the Akan people” (Willis, 1998, p.1). They are usually represented with the symbol, the symbol name, and a philosophy or saying associated with the symbol.

For HEGC!, faculty infuse Adinkra symbols and concepts throughout the course in readings, pictures, and in a lecture during the immersion experience from the Ntonso Village Stampers. These Adinkra symbols also serve as a way through which faculty frame the assessment as a pedagogy approach for HEGC!. The culturally conscious assessment approach can be framed with three Adinkra symbols: sankofa (individualized learning and reflection), funtunfunefu denkyemfunefu (group and community learning), and nea onnim no sua a, ohu (meta assessment and experiential learning).

**Sankofa.** Throughout the course, participants reflect upon their understanding of the African-Ghanaian context, the central/big question for the course, decentering whiteness, and decolonization. This reflection means that they have to recall from memory their perceptions, experiences, and thoughts and then bring it forward to meaning-making and praxis. In this practice of constantly reflecting and recalling, faculty are able to see how participants are learning and growing throughout their experience in the HEGC! study abroad program. The Adinkra symbol, sankofa, symbolizes the need to learn from the past and has, as its proverb, “go back and fetch it” (Willis, 1998, p. 188). Through written and verbal reflections, faculty are also able to attend to the pedagogical approach of co-constructing the learning environment with participants and have them engage in reflection about their own approaches as educators. This observation of learning is seen in real time and used to make adjustments to class material that was unclear to participants or to continue discussions that aided in participant learning.

For example, when reflecting on decentering whiteness and decolonization as part of an initial pre-immersion assignment, some participants conflated the two terms. In the next class session, program faculty reviewed the terms and showing how they were interrelated and connected but different. From this correction, participants provided different examples from the clarified definitions from their experience in-country. Reflection was not only helpful to understand individual learning, but also to understand group assignments and community learning.

**Funtunfunefu denkyemfunefu.** The Adinkra symbol funtunfunefu denkyemfunefu represents the Siamese crocodile which shares a stomach but has multiple heads. This symbol which represents unity and democracy is instructive about why it is important to work collaboratively with others and not in competition. The course centers on a collaborative project that participants work in groups with a Ghanaian partner to complete. The project itself is separated into four phases: outline, expanded outline, presentation and paper. In each part of the project, participants are responsible for working together to break down the project elements and complete with each other. In addition, participants also contribute to reflection points verbally in the course through pairs and shares and group discussions.

These assignments showed course progression for participants. As indicated above, the assignments indicated individualized needs through reflections and how to address those individualized needs as part of a community. Further, the project-based group learning helped us to simulate how practitioners could work collaboratively in decentering whiteness and using decolonization methods in higher education. Both of these approaches provided a foundation for engaging in lifelong experiential learning as part of the HEGC! study abroad program. For example, in one cohort of the program, participants benchmarked student affairs and higher education graduate programs for a university project partner. They engaged with several universities in asking about the development and implementation of graduate programs in their contexts from questions they developed with the university project partners. The final deliverable to the project partner was a benchmarking report about graduate programs throughout the continent of Africa to inform the creation of a student affairs and higher education graduate program in Ghana.

**Nea onnim no sua a, ohu.** The Adinkra symbol *nea onnim no sua a, ohu* is meant to represent lifelong learning and is represented through the proverb “He who does not know can know through learning” (Zauditu-Selassie, 2011, p. 306). Throughout the program, faculty are looking for how participants are incorporating what they are learning from the course into their scholarship and practice. Faculty are looking through their reflections, group projects, discussions for how they are going to integrate decentering whiteness, decolonization, and learning from the Ghanaian context into their practice. For example, the former participants and authors of this paper wanted to continue to engage in the practices and pedagogies garnered from the HEGC! in-country experience. Additionally, one participant decided to attend HEGC! for a second year and complete a project on campus environments in the Ghanaian context. Another participant decided to participate in the HEGC! study abroad program after participating in a global classroom taught by the authors on integrating student development theory across the American and Ghanaian contexts. After the program, that participant became a teaching assistant for the global classroom the following year. This represents the idea that study abroad can have lasting implications for participants and for educational institutions. HEGC! was designed to engage participants in their role as educators in a global society rather than just learning and applying their education to and within the context of the Global North. The HEGC! study abroad program equips participants with the tools and strategies to engage in this type of education for a lifetime, not just in the course. In this way, HEGC! is the impetus for lifelong experiential education through their project-based learning.

## **Implications and Reflections for Study Abroad and Assessment**

The HEGC! study abroad program contributes to a growing body of experiential knowledge that centers culturally conscious assessment approaches as a critical component of practice within higher education. It also continues to elevate the need for additional study abroad and collaboration between the Global West and East, specifically West African countries like Ghana.

First, study abroad programs should not only introduce participants to the culture and history within a particular culture, but should also introduce participants to knowledge systems and ways of knowing within the culture. In HEGC!, this took the form of introducing students to the concept of coloniality within and between the Ghanaian and United States as well as how local knowledge about the system of higher education is built upon that concept. By introducing students to these knowledge systems, study abroad

programs can be an important asset in decolonizing knowledge and decentering whiteness as the standard for knowledge production and dissemination. In this way, assessment of student learning is not just about their appreciation for cultural heritage, but also appreciation and incorporation of cultural knowledge.

Second, study abroad programs can be integral in creating opportunities for participants to work *with* individuals within the country context to collaborate and apply their learning in experiential forms. Often, students self-report their learning in assessment through indirect means. HEGC! uses reflection as a tool to understand what students are learning, but also uses project-based learning to *demonstrate* that learning. In addition, the project-based learning exposes participants to other forms of knowing in the realities of student affairs and services and higher education practitioners. Faculty are able to, then, triangulate what participants are learning with the elements of the program that help them demonstrate that learning.

Finally, assessment as pedagogy is a powerful tool for the complexities of learning that happen during a study abroad program. In real-time, the progress of the HEGC! study abroad program students can be seen. This includes knowledge gained in their learning experiences, where they may have less understanding, and how faculty can continue to facilitate their learning and growth. Many of the HEGC! participants will become higher education practitioners and scholars—the knowledge gained through the program as well as the assessment methods they used during the program can become helpful in their own practice and scholarship.

Through cultural conscious pedagogy and assessment, HEGC! provides an excellent case study for assessment as pedagogy. HEGC! centers the Ghanaian culture through the study of higher education. As a result, program participants are both learning about the country of Ghana as well as the structure of higher education in the context. With this dual foci in the learning process, program faculty utilize assessment as pedagogy to understand participant learning and growth throughout the program, to make adjustments throughout the program, and to co-create a learning experience with program participants. Assessment as pedagogy also provides a frame for faculty to assess participants individually, within their project groups, and as a collective to track their learning throughout the program. The authors incorporate this practice in the section that follows.

## Authors' Reflections

In the following section and in line with the approach of HEGC!, the authors utilize intersubjective dialogue between all authors to frame these program implications and consider the impact of the HEGC! study abroad program on faculty and participant responses to the central question, the use of assessment as pedagogy, and continued learning post-program around the learning objectives for the program. Through HEGC!, the authors aspire to continue to uplift the need to offer new perspectives on study abroad programs, learning and professional preparation, and assessment in higher education.

**Kiyah (participant):** The study abroad experience definitely had me contemplating ‘what does a decolonized approach to student affairs truly look like?’ And as expected, the answer to this question is never truly clear-cut and is an evolving question to consider. Culturally conscious practice and pedagogy reflects a similar vein to the continual journey of self awareness, cultural competency and reflection. I am firmly aware that there is no easy answer or quick solution to how to become culturally conscious. Part of this

experience gave me comfort in the idea of not always having an answer and that the work of decolonizing student affairs does not have to be done in isolation. Instead, I am able to call on both my U.S. and Ghanaian colleagues to continue pressing the agenda of socially just institutions of higher learning that honors all ways of knowing and makes space for liberatory education practices. I also acquired a depth of local and Indigenous models of student affairs practice through my engagement with Ghanaian colleagues and partners. This will continue to help mold me into a more globally-minded, self-aware, and thoughtful student affairs professional.

My engagement in Ghana was intentional - seeking to understand and learn from the Ghanaian community and their educational context instead of imposing my westernized view of higher education. I built a coalition with the Ghanaian community through listening and garner knowledge from their lived experiences and expertise to help in addressing current challenges facing Ghanaian higher education. During the program, I was a part of the *Benchmarking and Implications for Higher Education and Student Affairs* group where my group mates and I examined student affairs practice across peer Ghanaian and African institutions. We assessed participant learning, satisfaction, and effectiveness of current participant programs to help inform a larger proposal of co-developing a graduate program in higher education and student affairs at the University of Cape Coast.

This immersive study abroad experience in Ghana was a transformational experience that exposed me to the deficits of my own socialization and its lack of inclusive and Indigenous pedagogy. I was given an opportunity to reflect on my binary way of thinking about student affairs and helped to foster cohesion and complexity in what the future of the field will look like. There was definitely a greater layering of self-reflection of both personal and professional experiences as well as the role of theory in my practice. Ultimately, I gained a greater awareness of myself and life's mission. I am reminded of the importance of community and the commitment to my call as helper, advocate, educator, mentor, family member, and more.

Through the unpacking of connected literature and community dialogue, I was able to address my socialization in critical ways. I looked at different frameworks that support dominant ways of knowing and how those are oftentimes rooted in whiteness. I critically examined how the normative lens of my education and training acted as a vehicle that reinforced Western cultures and norms. Through this self-reflection, I am able to address my growth edges and foster a grounded appreciation of Ghanaian and other global culture, people and norms. And with all this learning, I recognize there is more understanding to gain and more work to do. So I will answer the call to return and continue returning.

**Alexis (participant):** Ghana has taught and continues to teach and pass through me. I decided to enroll in the HEGC! program for the first time in Winter 2018 and again in 2019. From the first class session of HEGC!, I was challenged to see beyond the lens through which I had seen the world up until that point. As a first-semester graduate student, I was eager to learn and embark on the journey of what I did not know. Looking at my first pre-reflection assignment during the pre-immersion in November 2017, I am reminded of my open and eager mind, my thirst for the knowledge that I knew this course would bring. I did not know what to expect, and, likewise, was truly open to allowing Ghana to pass through me.

As we embarked on the immersion experience the first year, Ghana challenged me to think beyond my socialization and prior knowledge of the world and higher education.

I was challenged to unpack the western socialization that told me that western ways and knowledge were the standards by which everyone should abide by. This was done primarily through the daily reflection prompts but also through personal journaling. It was through reflection that I was able to make sense of the affective aspects of learning that were taking place. That is, while I was learning about the history between Ghana and the U.S. and gaining an understanding of what it means to decenter whiteness in higher education, I also found myself wrestling with the realities of the complicated and gruesome history of colonialism and slavery. I felt deeply connected to the history of Ghana, and collectively, this was very much a spiritual experience. My spirit was touched by the people and land of Ghana as Ghana was (is) a point of connection.

As I came to understand our interconnectedness, I felt like I was learning not only about Ghana but from Ghana, while also learning about myself. Emersion, I found myself still in a place of reflection and observation as I began to see myself in a different light and take a critical look at western knowledge and ways; having gained an appreciation for a way of being and knowing outside of my own. For everything that I learned as a student and practiced as a practitioner, the question arose: Where did this knowledge come from? Whose voice is centered and valued here? Are the practices that I'm implementing contextually appropriate? From a practitioner perspective, I still had a lot of questions and a lot to learn about how to decenter whiteness and support students as a global practitioner.

I chose to return to deepen my connection with Ghana and grow as a global practitioner and scholar. I think that is the beauty in returning, is Ghana plants something in your spirit and it's as if you never left, a reminder that we are connected and that our work together is never finished. Leveraging what I had learned through my first experience, I was able to begin working on a research project centered on Campus Environments in the Ghanaian context where I, from my observation of culture embedded in the physical spaces on Ghanaian college campuses, wanted to understand the relationship that students had with their campus environments. This project is teaching me the importance of culturally conscious use of theory and has challenged me to decolonize my research practices. I've learned that this work cannot be done without centering Indigenous voices and knowledge. While the first year I spent a lot of energy on the program unpacking my socialization and centering myself in the Ghanaian context, the second year on the program, while still in a place of learning, I found myself in a more comfortable, collaborative, and connected place. In this place, I was not just a consumer of knowledge but in community with our Ghanaian partners, colleagues, fellow participants, and instructors; a co-creator of knowledge as I gained a deeper understanding of our separate and collective lived experiences and the connections that we share.

**Candace (faculty):** I operate from a place of complete gratitude and honor to share in the learning experience, both intellectually and emotionally, with my colleagues—participants, faculty, in-country collaborators—in the HEGC! study abroad program. As faculty, we learn in concert with the program participants. Our learning is truly interconnected. Our interconnectedness is largely attributed to the culturally conscious pedagogy that informs the HEGC! study abroad program. As faculty for the program who also identify as Black, Christian, cisgender women, from the southern region of the United States, inherent in our approach to designing the course and enacting the goals of the course through our instruction, course reflections, cooperative-project based assignments, and cultural exposure is our shared calling to collaborate with Ghanaian scholars, higher education administrators and graduate participants. We are spiritually drawn to the

African diaspora, emphasizing the importance of connecting with our ancestral spirits and wanting to learn with our Ghanaian colleagues how to advance participant services from Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Our engagement with Black feminist affect love politics permeates throughout the entire study abroad program. Having an appreciation for the rich culture and traditions of Ghana, the nation's higher education enterprise, and sociohistorical ideals are essential to bring into the symbolic classroom. Moreover, partnering with the study abroad participants as knowers, learners, and contributors to the learning process in our symbolic classroom is an invaluable component of our culturally conscious pedagogical approach to the study abroad program. Our approach allows for regenerative reflection, innovation, and shared investment in the learning process.

Ghana continues to teach me through Sankofa how knowledge is acquired and transferred; yet, *Nea onnim no sua a*, *ohu* teaches me how learning can be transformative. Our collective innovations shared between the program faculty, participants, and Ghanaian partners are transforming participant services in Ghana and quite honestly transforming American notions of participant support services and learning that contribute to participant success in college. Engaging in culturally conscious pedagogy and practice informs how international and domestic faculty and participants can mutually “go back and fetch it [knowledge]” (Willis, 1998, p. 188) to reimagine how learning takes place and where learning takes place. Study abroad programs that feature West African culture gain a nuanced understanding of the world inclusive of people, places, systems, ownership, knowledge to decenter whiteness and its misgivings on what is valued and true across humanity.

While employing culturally conscious pedagogy and practice in the context of this study abroad program is operationalized to include elements of chieftaincy, culturally relevant pedagogy, empowerment evaluation and action research, we contend that as our collective ideologies on learning and assessment pedagogy continues to be enriched by our program participants and Ghanaian partners, we as program faculty will experience cultural hybridity—the fluidity of time and space to expand our worldviews and possibly shift our understanding of what informs our culturally conscious pedagogy and practice.

**Jillian (faculty):** I think it is so interesting to be writing this essay during the COVID-19 global pandemic because it definitely parallels with what we are attempting to learn with participants through the HEGC! study abroad program. Each of you shared that it was the learning in context and gaining of multiple perspectives or lenses that was the most beneficial to your learning experience. When I went to Ghana for the first time and learned about the education system as a graduate participant, I could have only imagined where this program would have taken me in my scholarly practice.

Every year, I think we get a different group of participants who challenge and transform our pedagogy and help us to see how we should continuously improve the program to meet the learning objectives. Increasingly, higher education leaders are recognizing the need for assessment that helps to frame equity, justice, and decolonizing methods (Heiser, Prince, & Levy, 2017; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). While these framings are necessary, they are emergent and will require additional testing as practitioners begin to consider culturally conscious assessment in their practice. The examples we have provided from the HEGC! program represents how we have intentionally incorporated equity, justice, and decolonizing methods into our study abroad program. In addition, it represents how we use assessment as pedagogy to see in real-time



how participants were learning. Further, by framing our use of assessment as pedagogy in Adinkra symbols, we relate our work to the Ghanaian context and not be over-reliant on the American-Western context as the standard by which all others should be compared.

Future study abroad programs can incorporate cultural conscious assessment practices and pedagogy to relate the course objectives, assessment, and using assessment as pedagogy to contextualize the program for the context in which it takes place. Using the example of the case study here, study abroad programs can demonstrate how participants are gaining multiple perspectives across cultures rather than just being an experience of objectifying cultures. There is a lot of promise in utilizing assessment as pedagogy in study abroad programs to decenter whiteness, introduce decolonization strategies, and employ culturally conscious practices.

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