Global Teaching and Learning Fellows 2026 Essays

How do we show up as educators in places not necessarily home to us—with students both like and unlike us, as well as local residents—all of us with our own fears and desires,
to create meaningful engagements that positively shape our shared future?

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I go into this work as a learner myself, alongside my students rather than in front of them. I want them to see that I approach them first as a person – flawed, present and as human as they are – and to trust that I have their backs as we learn together. What makes that aspiration hard right now is how difficult it has become to disconnect and immerse ethically in learning experiences. The drumbeat of shepherding students through mandatory curriculum in fresh and engaging ways, showing up for every kind of student in my classroom, evaluating them fairly, challenging them to push themselves a bit farther, and holding their attention against the myriad things competing for it, can drown out the very thing I am here to do as an educator.

What I want for my students is simple to say and hard to practice. I want them to be less outcome and assessment focused so that they can embrace the learning process, and to feel less pressure to be perfect at everything, to have the right grade and to check the boxes so that when they come out of the course they have "done the things" but maybe didn't learn something deeply. I want them to know the content, which is critical and part of my role as an educator, but more importantly, I want them to come out confident in their ability to learn, to think through a problem, to ask questions, and to be curious. Mostly, I want students to look up from their devices, free themselves from the burden of doing the safe assignment, embrace their creativity, and see where their curiosity about a topic leads. What I want for myself is to be a collaborator on this journey with them, helping to steer them as they dive in.

I carry my own fears into this work, and I think it matters to name them, because they are the mirror image of those hopes. I fear that students have been so thoroughly trained to be outcome-oriented, to chase the end grade, that the openness immersive learning depends on has been schooled out of them. I fear our education system has grown risk-averse, when stepping into unfamiliar places asks us to embrace risk and the unknown. And I fear how hard it has become for any of us to disconnect, to set down the myriad selves we present to the world and immerse fully, with all our senses, in an actual place with actual people. These fears are not

reasons to retreat from the work; they are the reasons I think it is urgent. So much of what I want to do as an educator is to ask my students for a little more: to dig a little deeper, to question their own ideas a bit more, to spend more time talking to peers and community members, to take a little more risk than feels comfortable. Not all at once, and not toward some perfect end, just a little more than they thought they would give, again and again, until that reaching becomes a habit.

These instincts aren't just temperament. Over the course of the Global Teaching and Learning Fellowship (GTLF), I learned to locate them in the frameworks of global learning we were taught. The quadrant, which maps comfort in learning along an objective–subjective axis and an individual–collective one, surfaced a tension I had not named before: my discipline tends toward the objective, since our students must master systems, processes, and facts to become competent engineers, while my own comfort lies on the subjective end. So, in my teaching I am constantly pulling concepts out of isolation and asking students to apply their objective learning to a messy, subjective world. This partly reflects my own preference for learning by doing, but it also stems from my background as an interdisciplinary scholar. I am always seeking to broaden students' understanding so they see how complicated concepts become the moment they leave the textbook. The work ahead, for me, is to provide learning experiences across the whole quadrant, so that every student finds learning that feels both comfortable and challenging.

That applied learning carries an ethical weight that I take seriously, and it begins with the language we use for the places we go. Communities are places where people live and work; they are not our classrooms, and insinuating they are such reduces the richness and lived experience of community members to an instrument of a wealthy and intrusive institution. These experiences require us to be invited into spaces where we are guests, and to walk a careful line so that our presence does not turn the communities of local residents into a backdrop for our learning. To hold that line, I prepare my students to approach experiential learning with openness and curiosity instead of judgement. I ask them to question their assumptions and expectations about an experience before, during, and after engagement. For example, before engaging on short- or longer-term experiences, I lead my students through a series of discussions, often prompted with readings or podcasts, sometimes with guest speakers from the community. My students arrive both like and unlike me, and unlike one another: different backgrounds, different life experiences, different fears and excitements about the place we are entering. Part of my

preparation is asking them to surface their own motivations, preconceptions, and judgements before we go, so that we can enter a place together without flattening it, or each other, into a single story. I am also honest that I cannot hold everyone's fears and desires in balance, least of all those of the residents hosting us as their priorities are their own and rarely align neatly with ours. So, rather than pretend to balance it all, I try to make space for those differences to shape the work.

Once we are in the work, I ask students to write reflections on what they're learning and, in particular, to pay attention to the paradoxes that arise in the perspectives they encounter and the ones they are holding. Here, too, I am asking for a little more: to sit with a paradox rather than resolve it quickly, to question a first reaction a bit longer. This tension becomes a great point for debate and discussion because there are rarely correct answers in the problems they are solving; there are only choices and consequences. That can unnerve students. In the future, to help them sit in that space, I want to bring in the pyramid tool, a framework for shifting perspective from *looking at* someone, or some community, to *looking as* someone, or some community.

Overall, the answer for how to engage in ethical immersive learning experiences that I keep returning to is co-creation . I try to live out this concept not just with community partners, but start with it in my own classroom with students. To frame my classroom as genuinely co-created, I have engaged in some bold pedagogies with my students, a risk that, while difficult and uncomfortable, ultimately feels more authentic to building student confidence in their own learning agency as well as designing projects that ethically engaging community partners. For instance, in one of my courses, I co-created the syllabus with the students. Before the semester started, I had outlined the course learning objectives and some broad topic areas we would cover. During the first week of the course, students individually and in groups proposed the types of assignments they expected, the ways in which they wanted to be assessed and how the assessments were distributed in time and in weight across the semester, and outlined their expectations of themselves, each other, and me as the instructor. After whole-class debate and discussion, we came to three possible agreed-upon frameworks for the semester. I presented back to them the potential challenges and opportunities each model afforded (from my perspective), and we agreed to a process of adoption by democratic vote. This created a sense of ownership by the students over their own learning for the semester and allowed me to build out the syllabus to

align with the expectations we had all agreed upon. By engaging in this process with students, I modeled an approach they then implemented when co-creating their semester-long projects with our community partners. The most meaningful shift, to me, was that students asked for their community partners to be involved in the assessment of their work; this grounded the engagement in authenticity and moved our community partners from being treated like residents in a classroom to being valued collaborators on projects.

Immersive learning is critical at this moment, maybe even more than ever before, as our society continues to experience separation from place and space; as our increased online connection creates echo chambers and disconnection from the communities we live, work, and learn in; as we suppress our human creativity on the altar of accomplishing more, faster; and as we are exposed to continued rhetoric that others our differences even as globalization marches forth. It invites us to step back from our ways of knowing and the well-worn pathways of curriculum delivery and assessment, to pull at the threads of what it is we actually want our students to learn. When we step into that with our students, we become better educators, reminded of our collective humanity and asked to reconsider the role of an educator as more of a guide. Our role becomes helping students navigate their learning, collaborate with communities, and integrate their knowledge as they become independent learners across their lives. When we embrace the messiness of it, we invite in other perspectives and experiences that challenge our ways of knowing and thinking, asking us to reconsider what we know about a topic, a community, a person. Ultimately, immersive learning experiences invite us to embrace our collective existence while bravely stepping into the unknown to co-create outcomes with our students and community collaborators. To have hope in the future, I have to hope that my students feel connected to the spaces and places in which they live and work so that, when faced with challenging decisions in their future lives and careers, they can lean on that connection as they reason, and embrace humanity more fully along the way. If I have done my work well, the "little more" I kept asking of them becomes something they ask of themselves: to dig deeper, to question, to get to know others, and to risk a bit more, long after they have left my classroom.

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When entering new spaces, I have often taken on the role of observer. Engaging with the space and the people through osmosis, through sharing physical time and environments, through existing together. I have always worried about what it means to enter into a context from which I am an outsider. Colonizing words like "invading" or "extracting" have often come to mind when thinking about traveling to new places. That I'm disrupting the equilibrium by visiting, temporarily, another place. I have thought it important to make myself small in these spaces. Try not to be perceived as an other, to blend in as best as possible, to learn as much of the language I can to ensure locals do not feel the need to accommodate me. From a learning perspective, this can only lead to shallow processing and engagement. Also, it could still be seen as extractive. If I never open up or offer parts of myself to the place and people, how can we learn and grow together?

When considering relationships, I have regularly had concerns with the ways I connect or do not connect with others. How fleeting will this be? How much can I share before I feel nervous that someone knows too much about me, might perceive me differently? How can we make sure this is an authentic interaction, even if it is going to be fleeting? What happens as we drop in and out? As we are the ones to leave? Why would I open myself up to people I may never see again? I imagine many of these concerns are the same to cross students' minds as they enter a new classroom each semester.

In educational environments, we often reward students for verbal engagement. We believe that those who ask questions, answer them, and share ideas or perspectives are those thinking intentionally about the material and connections to their lives. I have struggled with this norm as a learner, finding it takes time and some debate with myself to tease apart my opinions and understandings. I often considered that when entering new contexts, traveling to new spaces, constantly asking questions of others would be a sign of imposition, of selfishness. Instead, I should gather up every sight, sound, smell, feeling that I stumble across and put them together into my constellational understanding of the place. What I now see is this work can be relational.

Throughout this experience, I wondered if being present somewhere is enough. Reflecting now, I consider the importance of these interlocking forms of engagement. How being still, quiet, listening, observing affords an important foundational understanding of a place, of its heart, its motion. Accompanied by caring, authentic, meaningful interactions is the part of the puzzle I had been missing or perhaps had actively ignored to protect my own feelings of safety and security. Being with colleagues and locals, stumbling through the language, asking questions about one another's lives, the mundane, the extravagant. To be vulnerable in the face and hands of experts, to create something together from nothing, to support and be part of the artistry, the breath, the life of the place.

When making jewelry together, our maestro, Fernando, would check our work along the way and often refrain "un poco mas," a little more. While he would retort this to share that we needed to continue our filing or sanding, in an attempt to make the piece more stable, sound, or beautiful, perhaps, I carried this forward in another way throughout our time together. Maybe I needed to bring myself to this space a little more. What if I could show up for people a little more, to be vulnerable a little more, to be present a little more, to talk a little more, to ask a little more, to dance a little more, to taste a little more, to learn a little more, to try a little more, to explore a little more, to take in a little more, to leave a little more?

In considering what I will take forward in the future, I am left with so many important questions to frame my thinking, my approach, and my intentions. Importantly, I carry a deep value for understanding the authentic, perhaps quotidian experiences that we might skip over in favor of something planned, fantastic. The serendipity of finding out your local host family also loves Bruce Springsteen and The Bear, that the jewelry apprentice is working down the street the next day and has excellent dinner recommendations. That the item you want to order at dinner, they don't have the ingredients for, so they go out and buy them to make it fresh. That the plaza nearby is along the route of the nightly town celebrations. That those nights, those questions, might lead to deep authenticity and vulnerability to shared experiences and hardships. That rather than remaining passive, to be an active participant in the happenings is also to remain open to what is to come. That we are better when we are together, learning how each of us chooses to be and is.

While I don't have answers to most (any?) of these questions. I am left with such a stronger understanding of how to show up authentically in a new place, with people who are

strangers, and see how that can lead to developing a home and creating incredible friendships. Whether they be fleeting or ephemeral, they will always be tattooed on and carried with me.

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My life has been a masterclass in displacement and translation. Years ago, I left my hometown of Esfahan (a historic, industrial hub in central Iran) to pursue my undergraduate degree in Tehran. That first move sparked a lifelong passion for cultural immersion that eventually pulled me to Milan for my master's, Florida for my PhD, California for a postdoc, Mississippi to begin my faculty career, and finally, to Pennsylvania.

With every border crossed and language studied, my worldview expanded. Travel has a funny way of decentering your ego; it forces you to realize that your way of living is just one data point among billions, fostering a deep respect for those who are fundamentally different from you.

This tension between the universal and the specific defines my work as an assistant professor of bioengineering. In my research, I strive for absolute scalability. I design health monitoring systems that are intentionally place-agnostic, race-agnostic, and skin-color-agnostic. I want to build medical solutions that can be seamlessly deployed in a high-resource American hospital or a remote, resource-limited clinic in Africa. In the lab, success means stripping away local variables to find a universal human truth. But as an educator leading students abroad, I've learned that stripping away the local context is precisely where we fail.

In the summer of 2025, I led a month-long study abroad program in Rome, teaching Engineering Mechanics I to a group of American students. On paper, it was a massive success. We had morning lectures, ate "real pizza", practiced a few Italian words, and spent afternoons visiting the Colosseum and the Vatican. Yet, a persistent, uncomfortable question followed me home: What was the pedagogical point of being in Rome?

The students were taking the exact same core engineering curriculum they could have taken on their home campus. If the city of Rome was merely serving as a scenic backdrop for standard equations (interspersed with museum visits and gelato) couldn't they have just taken the class at home and vacationed in Italy later? I realized that many engineering study abroad programs fall into this trap of "academic tourism." We inherit structures that treat the foreign

location as an amenity rather than an active participant in the learning process. I left Italy wondering: are core engineering classes inherently unsuited for meaningful global engagement, or are we just designing them wrong?

The Global Teaching and Learning Fellows program in Guanajuato gave me the answers I was looking for. Our interdisciplinary cohort arrived as strangers from entirely different academic silos, but we left as close friends. That transformation didn't happen because we listened to lectures about global learning; it happened because the program was designed around shared vulnerability and tactile, localized engagement.

We didn't just observe local culture; we participated in it. We sat side-by-side to forge our own silver rings and hear un poco más. We walked into the homes of local residents, whose beautiful Spanish language many of us could barely speak, to share lunch and play Lotería. In those moments of linguistic friction and shared laughter, the traditional academic hierarchy collapsed. We weren't experts extracting an experience; we were guests learning how to navigate a space that wasn't ours.

This is the blueprint I plan to bring back to my pedagogy at Lehigh. Guanajuato taught me that if we want students to create a meaningful, shared future with communities unlike their own, the location of the program must matter. As an engineer, I can no longer treat global locations as passive settings for universal equations. Instead, I want to design study abroad programs where the local environment is fused directly into the curriculum. For instance, instead of just teaching place-agnostic mechanics, we can task students with analyzing how local resource constraints, regional infrastructure, and community traditions dictate how medical or mechanical solutions are built on the ground.

By forcing our students to step off the pedagogical pedestal, to sit at local tables, navigate language barriers, and listen to local needs, we teach them to become more than just technically proficient engineers. We teach them to be humble, symbiotic global citizens. My research will always focus on creating tools that are agnostic to human differences, but my global teaching will now ensure that our students are deeply, beautifully attuned to them.

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I found the Global Teaching and Learning Fellowship to be incredibly enriching. I went in hoping to meet new colleagues and to gain a firmer understanding of how to implement a study abroad program in Senegal. I left a week-long immersion experience in Guanajuato Mexico with new friends, tangible ideas to implement in my own study abroad program, and a wonderful meditation on embodied, place-based learning. The experience, which focused on relationships, somatic experiences, and paying attention to place, will inform not only my teaching abroad, but my teaching more broadly.

I was incredibly fortunate to have a tremendous group of Fellows in my cohort who cared so deeply about students and pedagogy. It was such a unique space in that many people had concrete ideas that they had implemented to improve classroom experiences, to build relationships with students, and to center learning. We talked about generational challenges, those posed by AI, and tensions within attempting to incorporate new forms of learning and covering curricula. It felt luxurious to spend a full week thinking almost exclusively about pedagogy. I feel re-energized in my pursuit of experiential learning in the classroom and got some excellent ideas from my colleagues.

Lina and Eduardo organized a couple of nice “bite-sized” immersive experiences that were very helpful for me to think through ways to organize study abroad activities. Even though very few of us spoke Spanish, they found ways to encourage immersion in a very short-term set up. This included giving us some change and having us try to go buy things at the local market. It was so much fun to try to communicate to accomplish our mission. Another fantastic activity was the host family lunch – where we were sent in groups to a host family in the city. I had an incredibly experience with two wonderful hosts who made me miss my grandparents tremendously. Such warmth and attempts to understand us. It brought me right back to being a novice language learner. We also visited a lavender farm and production site (and ate the mos

delicious food), which reminded me of the importance of site visits and exposing students to diverse topics.

Tangibly, I think this program benefits my contribution to Lehigh in four ways. First, as a the new director of the Global Studies program -it was incredibly helpful to meet other colleagues doing international work (I found shared interests in USAID-funded work with Gabby and plan to discuss this in greater depth back in the states) and to make connections across colleges and to see how to better align with Iaccoca. Second, it changed the way that I am thinking about approaching my study abroad such that now I feel greater liberty to assemble a bunch of smaller experiential mini-immersions rather than a longer project around a singular topic. Third, I now have an incredible group of peers who I know are excited about discussing innovative pedagogy whom I can turn to when I have a new idea or a question. Fourth, I made some new friends – many in different colleges and that is super exciting. As I complete my first year at Lehigh – I am incredibly grateful for this experience.

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Channeling the beautifully humble curiosity of the late Anthony Bourdain – I strive to be a traveler, and not a tourist. As I reflect on my recent experience in Guanajuato, Mexico, alongside scholars and local residents both like and unlike me, who share similar anxieties about the unknown and a desire to create meaningful engagement, I find myself thinking deeply about innovative ways to encourage intentional curiosity to cultivate memorable moments through exposure and connection in my classroom and beyond. Simultaneously, I consider the risks of extractivism, the tourist. When we show up in places not home to us, what do we take, and what do we leave? How do we respectfully show up in unknown spaces?

I am a health disparities researcher educated in psychology, social work, and public health lenses. In my courses, we use theories and historical contexts to understand and address some of today's biggest health challenges. In many instances, my students, both like and unlike me, are unpacking concepts such as structural power and inequalities for the first time. Through exercises, we 'travel' to worlds both known and unknown, grappling with discomfort as we unpack bitter truths and strive to understand the factors that influence population health outcomes. In many ways, like the traveler, I encourage students to step out of their comfort zones, embrace the unfamiliar, and build meaningful connections to people, places, and concepts. Essentially, my students are asked to become intentional travelers rather than tourists.

Travel brings with it a complex set of questions about who we are and how we move through the world. While we travelers may share a curiosity and long for connection, we must also be reminded that we don't arrive at the same destination with the same power. Using a multidimensional lens to frame my experiences, I still see the cobblestone streets lined with costumed estudiantinas preparing to tell the colorful stories of Don Quixote, I hear La Causa as women retell stories of harrowing animal rescues and fighting for reproductive rights, I smell lavender and road dust where local women cultivate the herb to create products for luxury hotels, I taste the culture of Mexico in creamy avocado topped with citrus-dipped chapulines and fiery

mezcalitas con garambullos, and I feel the grit of sandpaper as I smoothed out the rough edges of a tiny piece of silver. These are the fragments of larger stories that complicate and reveal the coexistence of a shared humanity and the structural inequities embedded in the World and in ourselves– the intersections of labor, creativity, and community.

What I have learned from the Global Teaching and Learning Fellows trip is that when developing a global travel learning experience for students, we must cultivate an environment for immersive activities that move beyond simply eating, drinking, and sightseeing and into spaces for deep engagement with local residents, businesses, and community leaders. We must use thoughtful intention and creativity to extend the invitation to step outside of our protective bubbles and create unlikely connections, linked together by our shared humanity, and without erasing the conditions that shape whose knowledge is centered, whose labor is valued, and whose stories get told. We need a world of informed, open-minded, and responsive individuals, where empathy and adaptability are viewed as key strengths and not weaknesses. In the global teaching and learning programs, I will create immersive experiences that will encourage intentional and respectful travel towards becoming a traveler and not a tourist.

The journey changes you; it should change you. It leaves marks on your memory, on your consciousness, on your heart, and on your body. You take something with you. Hopefully, you leave something good behind."
Anthony Bourdai

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I like big questions. They widen and deepen my thinking, and they can give birth to new questions. But they can also be difficult to tackle all at once—in one large bite. I find the need to slice and dice them so they can be consumed and put to good use. Below is my attempt at carving out relevant bites that capture some of my thoughts from our shared experience in Guanajuato, Mexico.

I want to start this reflection with "students both like and unlike us, as well as local residents." I'm starting here because it was the phrase my mind kept returning to throughout the week. Perhaps more importantly, I believe "both like and unlike us" is what we as country (maybe a species) are struggling with right here and right now. It is likely we have always struggled with this but our current inability to handle others being different is having horrendous repercussions. Tackling this is what's needed to "positively shape our shared future."

How do we live with difference? How do we tame our fears and pursue our desires while allowing difference to thrive?

Difference cannot exist without sameness, yet we act as if they are separate entities. We are living in a moment where sameness is worshipped. We have homogenized our cities just to guarantee we can always get the same cup of coffee and that our burger will be exactly as we expect it to be. We gravitate to voices that sound like our own; voices that say the words we say, just how we say them. There is a sense of safety within sameness.

Was seeking the safety of sameness what caused our group (Greatest Cohort Of All Time-GCOAT) to bond so quickly and so strongly? Were we seeking the comfort of each other—recognizing our similarities across disciplines, roles, experiences, as well as our shared positionality as being (relatively) new to Lehigh—in order to safely embrace the differences around us? We quickly found we shared very similar teaching philosophies. Did we lean into these similarities as a buffer against the differences in language, culture, climate and visual beauty that surrounded us? Do/would students do the same?

Or were we just exhausted? Was it a reaction to a difficult academic and political year? Did we feel so beaten up that we were starved for "meaningful engagement"? Perhaps it was the "student" aspect. The freedom to be a student when you are always the teacher (or the facilitator, or the leader) was a true gift. It held space and time; it allowed us a chance to breathe. How can one "show up" if one can't ever catch their breath? Does being kept overworked and overstimulated decrease our ability to seek and embrace difference? If so, how can we create regular opportunities for respite within our work?

I can't end this reflection without commenting on the importance of place. It is the key to an immersive experience—bathing in the beauty, history, meaning of a place that is "not necessarily home" (but maybe home is something you carry with you; something you can share with others?). In this particular place and time, Guanajuato was immensely welcoming. We were invited in; hugged and held; encouraged to share in food, laughter and language. It was particularly humbling coming from a country dead set on viewing everyone as a stranger to be turned away. It was a chance to imagine ourselves as different than we currently are.

Possibly none of the above matters.
Possibly all that matters is finding a way to connect.
#un_poco_mas

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When I say this, I truly mean it: this was the most impactful professional experience of my career. I have thought about this trip constantly since returning home because it was much more than a professional development opportunity. It was an experience that challenged me, inspired me, and connected me with an extraordinary group of colleagues. By the second day, I remember telling Lina that I already felt fulfilled, and that feeling only grew stronger throughout the week. Recognizing so early that this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience made me more intentional about being fully present - listening carefully, sharing openly, embracing new experiences, and appreciating every moment. Beyond the invaluable lessons I learned, the trip created a genuine sense of community and belonging among our group. The relationships that were built during that week are among the most meaningful outcomes of the experience, and I am deeply grateful to have been part of it.

My trip to Mexico was incredible for so many reasons. The people, the culture, and the food made it memorable. They set the stage for an amazing environment, which was only enhanced by the teaching methods and relationships. On day one, we learned about a quadrant for thinking: meaning, action, facts, and relationships. The trip blended all four through deep pedagogical conversations. While I value each component on its own, looking at them as a whole is what matters most to me.

I want to bring this mindset to my classes at Lehigh this fall. To do this, I have a clear action plan. I will build stronger relationships with my students using daily check-ins. A simple system using smiley faces will help track their emotions and open the door for quick, daily conversations about how they are doing. Personal experience has taught me that getting student buy-in is half the battle. These new techniques will help achieve that.

I also want to inject more meaning into our daily routines. This means practicing mindfulness and pushing students out of their comfort zones. I found inspiration for this during a unique activity on the trip involving a toy turtle. We were asked to place it in a specific spot and observe the world from its perspective, trying to imagine what it was thinking. It was a total

epiphany. I usually view things mostly from my own perspective, which made me wonder: how can I better put myself in my students' shoes at Lehigh? To do this, I plan to introduce an empathy-building activity where students step out of their own heads and analyze a problem from a completely foreign stakeholder's point of view before starting a project. Additionally, breathing exercises will also help. A few moments of guided instruction can serve as a quick reset. It decompresses the room and gets students focused. I plan to use this in my biochemistry lab on final presentation day. I will also use it in my virology class right before students give their venture capitalist pitches. High-tension environments need this. It refocuses energy and calms raw nerves.

During the trip, we also explored Mexican lavender fields and made our own jewelry. Both activities pushed me out of my comfort zone because they required me to embrace uncertainty, be vulnerable, and engage in experiences where I had no expertise. What allowed me to move through those moments was the supportive environment that had been created by the group and our facilitators. There was no expectation of perfection, only a willingness to experiment and learn. That realization reinforced something I have long believed about teaching: students are far more willing to take intellectual risks when they feel safe doing so. For example, I stepped out of my comfort zone in my virology class last semester by converting it into a "start-up" business simulation. The class embraced working within a completely new environment on the business side of things. Now, I feel even more inspired to take the next step. I want to take my students to the Ben Franklin Incubator on Mountaintop. Just like reading about lavender farming or watching a jewelry-making video cannot compare to actually being in those environments, students need to step outside the classroom to truly understand how a startup operates. True learning requires real experience, but it also requires an environment where students feel comfortable trying new things, making mistakes, and thinking differently. I want to continue creating those opportunities at Lehigh.

I ask my students to write their "I Have a Dream" essay in my first-year biology class. My colleague Lina gave me some excellent ideas to build a more meaningful, actionable collaboration around it. Inspired by her insight on intentional reflection, I plan to introduce a peer-coaching workshop where students pitch their future visions to a classmate, helping each other refine their goals and connect their personal values directly to the essay. This will bring

more mindfulness and intention to the project, helping our students focus as they construct their dreams and plan their futures.

This trip has also sparked several new collaborative ideas with Lehigh faculty that I am eager to pursue. In my genetics class, I plan to work with Tracy to design simulated "AI patients" presenting with various conditions, such as drug dependencies, to help our students learn how to navigate these complex healthcare situations. In my virology course, I want to collaborate with Dean and Jamie to help students critically analyze how governmental regulations impact scientific innovation. Looking further ahead, I plan to work with Leah, Lina, and Eduardo to explore how I can establish my own ongoing connections abroad. During the trip, I met Abril, a PhD student from Mexico with a background in business. We discussed the exciting potential of a partnership that would allow my virology students to learn about international business dynamics directly through their class startup projects.

Ultimately, none of this would have been possible without Lina, Eduardo, and the Office of International Affairs. I want to extend my deepest thanks to them for the invitation and for putting together what was truly the very best professional trip of my career. Beyond the invaluable pedagogical takeaways, this experience has given me a new network of friends and colleagues and sparked collaborations that extend across multiple disciplines and colleges at Lehigh. I am incredibly excited to pursue these partnerships in the semesters ahead alongside colleagues from the College of Health, the College of Education, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Office of International Affairs, whose support helped make these new connections possible

slowing down, sitting-with, showing up
[by dean caivano]

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prologue [starting]

I was not prepared for how quickly the week slowed me down.

That is a strange thing to say because the week itself was full. The Global Teaching and Learning Fellows (GTLF) seminar in Guanajuato was not a retreat in the sense of withdrawal or escape. We attended talks, visited historical and cultural sites, shared meals, walked through the city, met with local residents and host families, and spent long stretches of time with colleagues from across Lehigh. There were eight faculty members and one administrative staff member from the Iacocca Institute, each of us arriving with our own habits of thought, teaching anxieties, institutional roles, and private ways of making sense of what it means to work with students in places not necessarily home to us.

And yet the week felt slower than the semester. Not empty. Not still. Not detached from work. Slower because time did not immediately collapse into the ordinary grammar of university life: class, office hours, email, meeting, grading, deadline, another email, another meeting, another task already waiting behind the task at hand. Slower because, for a few days, I was not compelled to translate every conversation into an outcome, every encounter into evidence, every shared moment into something institutionally useful. Slower because the week allowed the rare possibility of thinking about teaching without immediately needing to manage teaching.

Every day, we wandered through the streets. Over time, certain faces began to reappear. Even in a large city, if we followed the same paths at roughly the same time, we crossed. I saw people on their way to work, to a meal, or home from the workday. I saw the same stray dog begging for scraps. Even in a large space, even in a big world, things became small. Guanajuato began to feel less like an abstraction and more like a series of repeated encounters. Maybe the bowl-shaped geography of the city, with houses set into the mountainside and looking down into the streets below, made this feeling unavoidable. Maybe the streets simply folded us back into the same routes. Or maybe the city disclosed something more basic about the human condition: we are always with others, always crossing paths with strangers, but rarely inclined to notice our proximity.

The contradiction followed me through the week. We teach inside institutions that tell students to become attentive, reflective, and intellectually alive, while those same institutions press nearly everyone inside them to move faster, produce more, respond more quickly, and justify the value of nearly everything they do. We speak constantly about reflection, yet often have very little time to practice it. We talk about student belonging between meetings. We redesign courses while grading. We encourage students to linger with difficult ideas while already thinking about the next obligation forming in the background.

The guiding question for our GTLF seminar asked us: how do we show up as educators in places not necessarily home to us, with students both like and unlike us, as well as local residents, all of us carrying our own fears and desires, in order to create meaningful engagements that positively shape our shared future? I have been unable to move past the wording of that question because the question does not primarily ask for a method. The question does not ask which assignment works best, which pre-departure module produces the strongest learning outcome, or which reflective activity most

effectively demonstrates that students have become more globally aware. Those questions have their place, but they are not the question that matters most.

The deeper question, at least for me, is one of posture. How do we enter a place? How do we listen when we are guests? How do we teach without turning people into examples? How do we learn without quietly taking possession of what others share with us? How do we return without pretending that a week elsewhere has made us transformed, innocent, or wise?

I do not have a simple answer. I am suspicious of simple answers to questions of this kind. What I have instead are three postures that the week helped me identify more clearly: *slowing down, sitting-with,* and *showing up*. These are not best practices in the neoliberal sense, nor are they techniques. They are not learning outcomes. They are not items to place in a syllabus and assess later. They are *ethical* and *pedagogical commitments*, which means they remain unstable, unfinished, and difficult to inhabit consistently.

They also connect to the kind of democratic education I try to practice in my own classrooms. By democratic education, I do not simply mean a classroom in which students are invited to speak after the instructor has already established the conditions of knowledge. I mean an education that begins from the presumption that students are thinking beings, capable of interpretation, judgment, relation, and creation. I mean an education that rejects the banking model that Paulo Freire powerfully criticizes, in which teachers deposit knowledge into students, who are imagined as passive recipients. I also mean an education close to what Jacques Rancière, the French philosopher of radical democracy, describes in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: a pedagogy that begins from equality rather than treating equality as the reward for successful instruction.

Guanajuato reminded me that democratic pedagogy is not only a theory of the classroom. Democratic pedagogy is a *way of being with others*. A relation to time, place, authority, uncertainty, and the unfinished work of learning together.

i. slowing down

Franco "Bifo" Berardi, the Italian autonomist thinker and theorist of semiocapitalism, has devoted much of his work to understanding the psychic and political consequences of acceleration. His concern is not merely that modern life is fast. Speed has entered the nervous system. The demand to process more, communicate more, produce more (publish-or-perish, anyone?), respond more, and connect more has altered our capacity for attention, relationships, and meaning. Acceleration becomes internal, shaping perception, reorganizing desire, and training us to treat slowness as failure.

I thought about Bifo during the week because Guanajuato made me feel the extent of the damage to our relationship with time.

The university is one of the places where that damage is most visible. We are surrounded by the language of excellence, rankings, innovation, productivity, impact, return on investment, future-making, student success, and measurable outcomes. These words do not simply describe university life. They discipline us. They teach students to imagine education as accumulation: credits, credentials, internships, skills, experiences, lines on a résumé, evidence of future employability. They teach faculty

to imagine teaching as something that must always be translated into a reportable metric. They teach institutions to narrate themselves through motion, expansion, growth, improvement, and speed.

Lehigh is not outside this condition; no university is. We are all working within institutions that ask us to defend education in the language of value, even when the deepest forms of learning resist that language. Students deserve an education that matters to their lives. I do not want to pretend that education should be detached from work, livelihood, debt, family obligation, or the practical realities students face. But the language of value can begin to consume the practice of education itself. The classroom then becomes one more place where students learn to move quickly, perform, gather evidence, and prepare for the next stage of professional life before they have had time to ask what kind of life they are being prepared to enter.

This is what I want to resist.

I do not mean that slowness is automatically radical. Slowness can become indulgent. Slowness can become a privilege. Slowness can become another academic aesthetic, another way for those of us with relative security to feel critical of the very conditions we continue to inhabit. But a pedagogical form of slowing down *interrupts* the assumption that thinking is valuable only when it produces something quickly. This pedagogical slowing demystifies the fantasy that speed is the same as intelligence, that fluency is the same as understanding, that completion is the same as thought.

I felt this most clearly in the conversations that happened *between* scheduled events. Walking with colleagues. Sitting at meals. Listening to people speak about teaching not as a polished philosophy but as something tangled up with exhaustion, hope, anxiety, humor, care, failure, and the small victories that rarely appear in annual assessment reports. These were not interruptions from the seminar. They *were* the seminar. They reminded me that teaching often happens in the spaces that institutional schedules treat as secondary: the pause before class begins, the walk back from an event, the question that changes the direction of a conversation, the silence after someone says something honest.

The daily walks made the point differently. The same streets, the same corners, the same vendors, the same faces, the same dog, the same slow recognition that a place is never simply there to be passed through. We had to move through the city more than once before certain things became visible. Repetition produced attention. Attention produced a relation. The relation made the place harder to consume as scenery. That, too, is pedagogy. Not the lesson one writes in advance, but the lesson that becomes possible only after the body has been given enough time to notice where it is.

I want my classroom to make more room for that kind of time.

This does not mean abandoning rigor. In fact, I think the opposite is true. Serious reading requires time. Serious discussion requires time. The slow encounter with a difficult text requires more than comprehension. The text demands patience with confusion, the willingness to misread and revise, and the ability to remain with a question before converting it into an answer. When I teach Marx, Arendt, Fanon, Foucault, Rancière, or Butler, I do not want students simply to extract the argument and move on. I want them to experience what it means to be held up by a text, to be bothered by it, to feel its distance from them and its proximity to their lives.

That kind of education cannot happen at the tempo of the market. Such education cannot survive when every silence is treated as failure, every detour as inefficiency, and every ambiguity as something the instructor must immediately resolve. Nor can it survive when the classroom becomes another machine for producing certifiable competence (*this* degree and *that* certificate).

There is also a political dimension to this. Acceleration is not neutral. The accelerated university often rewards those who already know how to move inside institutional systems and punishes those who need more time to enter them. The accelerated university treats hesitation as weakness, uncertainty as lack of preparation, and reflection as delay. Students who have learned how to perform confidently move ahead. Students who are still finding their language, their footing, their relation to the material, or their trust in the room can be left behind.

A democratic classroom has to make time for those students. The classroom has to make time for the student who does not yet know how to phrase the question. The classroom has to make time for the student who needs to hear an idea more than once before responding. The classroom has to make time for the student who is thinking carefully but not quickly. The classroom has to make time for the class to sit with a claim that unsettles them, not so that everyone can arrive at the same conclusion, but so that thought can become shared rather than merely performed.

This is one of the things I felt most strongly in Guanajuato. The pace of the week allowed forms of attention that the semester often erodes. Conversations unfolded differently when no one was rushing to the next obligation. People listened more carefully when they were not also checking the clock. Faculty, like students, need conditions in which they can think aloud without having every thought already polished.

So, slowing down is the first posture I take from the seminar. Not as an escape. Not as nostalgia. Not as a fantasy that we can step outside the university's contradictions by walking more slowly through a beautiful city. Slowing down is useful because it gives us time to notice the contradictions we inhabit. Slowing down gives us time to ask: Who is in the room? Who is missing? Who is being asked to explain? Who is being asked to listen? What kind of shared life becomes possible when education is not reduced to the rapid management of tasks?

Slowing down, of course, does not solve the contradiction. Slowing down makes the contradiction visible enough to teach from it.

ii. sitting-with

If slowing down denotes a relation to time, sitting-with expresses a relation to others.

I am choosing that phrase carefully. Sitting-with is not passivity. Sitting-with does not mean simply occupying the same space. Sitting-with is not the same as observing, interviewing, interpreting, or collecting impressions from another person. Sitting-with is an ethical posture of attention. Sitting-with requires remaining in relation without immediately converting the other person into evidence, illustration, data, or lesson.

This matters especially in places not home to us. There is always a danger in educational travel and research, even when the intentions are thoughtful. We arrive, we observe, we are moved, we return,

and the place becomes material for our own reflection. A city becomes a backdrop. A local resident becomes an example. A moment of discomfort becomes evidence that we have learned something. The problem is not that we reflect on what we experience. Reflection is necessary. The problem begins when reflection absorbs everything into the self.

Emmanuel Levinas helps me think through this danger. Levinas was a twentieth-century philosopher of ethics whose work was shaped by the catastrophe of European fascism, war, displacement, and the Holocaust. His philosophy begins from a stark claim: ethics does not begin with knowledge, freedom, autonomy, or choice. For Levinas, ethics begins with the *other person*. The other is not first an object I know, study, classify, or understand. The other person *interrupts* me. The face of the other places a demand on me before I have decided what I want from them or what they mean to me. The ethical relation begins, in other words, before mastery.

In pedagogy, this matters because teaching carries a quiet temptation: to turn others into material. Students are not material for my teaching. Local residents are not material for global learning (or profit!). Colleagues are not material for my professional development. They are persons with histories, attachments, fears, forms of knowledge, contradictions, and desires that exceed what I can know. To sit-with them is to begin from that excess rather than attempt to overcome it.

Guanajuato sharpened this for me because the city constantly placed relation before interpretation. The market was not simply a vibrant space of fruits, colors, sounds, and movement, although it was that. The architecture was not simply beautiful, although it was often stunning. The buildings also carried the trace of human achievement and the mark of colonial power, both an object of admiration and of historical unease. The plazas were not simply open civic spaces where one could rest and enjoy the sights, sounds, and smells of city life. They were spaces where people crossed, gathered, waited, worked, sold, listened, passed through, and returned. They were spaces of proximity.

And then there were the small moments of recognition that are easy to miss. Eyes meeting briefly with a stranger. A face seen once, then again, and then again. The sense that we are rarely alone in the way we imagine ourselves to be. We look away all the time. We look at our phones. We look past one another. We keep moving. But when we do look, when we allow another person's presence to register, something changes. Not dramatically. Not sentimentally. But enough to feel the falsehood of self-containment. Enough to feel that one belongs to a world that precedes and exceeds the self.

This does not mean that we learned the city. The city reminded us of the limits of knowing. Sitting-with is not a refusal to think. Sitting-with is a refusal of closure. Sitting-with requires a willingness to remain with complexity without rushing to translate it into a clean lesson. Sitting-with also requires a willingness to be unsettled by what one hears, sees, feels, and does not yet understand.

I want to bring this more consciously into my classroom.

To sit-with students means recognizing that they arrive with forms of knowledge that are not always immediately legible within academic discourse. To sit-with students means making room for the messiness of their lives without demanding confession or turning vulnerability into an assignment. To sit-with students means acknowledging that students bring different relationships to power, language, family, work, place, violence, and the future. The classroom must become a space where students can

risk interpretation in the presence of others and where disagreement does not automatically become domination.

This is difficult work. Classrooms are not naturally democratic. They are marked by hierarchy from the beginning. I assign the readings. I structure the course. I grade the work. I stand in a position of institutional authority, whether I like it or not. Sitting-with students does not erase that authority, but it does change how I inhabit it. This posture asks me not to confuse authority with possession. This posture asks me not to assume that because I know the material, I know in advance what the students will make of it, what they will see in it, or how it will touch the worlds they inhabit.

Sitting-with also requires me to resist closure when closure would be easier. There are moments in teaching when the temptation is to tidy the discussion, synthesize the debate, and move the class toward a conclusion that feels pedagogically satisfying. Sometimes that is necessary. Students do need structure. Students need help moving through difficult ideas. But there are also moments when the most honest pedagogical act is to leave a contradiction intact. To let the class feel the weight of it. To acknowledge that not every question has to be resolved before it can teach us something.

Sitting-with becomes a democratic practice here. The posture refuses the assumption that the instructor's task is to bring the class from confusion to clarity as efficiently as possible. Sitting-with suggests instead that confusion, ambiguity, contradiction, discomfort, and partial understanding are not obstacles to learning but part of learning itself.

In Guanajuato, I felt the importance of this not only in relation to students but also to colleagues. Faculty rarely get to sit-with one another outside the obligatory roles we normally occupy. We are usually departmental representatives, committee members, program directors, advisors, evaluators, applicants, reviewers, or administrators of some kind. The seminar created a different kind of relation. We were still those things, of course, but we were also people thinking together about why we teach, what we fear, where we have failed, and how we want to do the work differently.

That kind of sitting-with is not incidental to pedagogy. That kind of sitting-with *is* pedagogy. Education is not produced by isolated experts. Education is produced by people learning how to remain in relation across difference, uncertainty, and unequal forms of power.

To sit-with, then, is to practice a pedagogy against mastery. To sit-with is to allow relation to precede explanation. Democratic education begins not when I have made everything clear, but when we are willing to remain together in the difficulty of what is not yet settled.

iii. showing up

Showing up ≠ being present.

A person can be present in a classroom and still be absent in every way that matters. An instructor can arrive on time, deliver the lecture, facilitate discussion, grade the papers, answer emails, hold office hours, and still never fully show up for the work of teaching. The difference lies in the quality of one's presence, the willingness to be affected by others, and the refusal to hide entirely behind the role of expert.

Expertise matters. I do not want to romanticize ignorance or pretend that preparation is unnecessary. Students deserve instructors who know their fields, take texts seriously, can frame difficult ideas with clarity, and understand the responsibility that comes with teaching. But expertise can become a shield. Expertise can protect us from vulnerability. Expertise can allow us to speak without listening, guide without being changed, and organize the classroom in ways that preserve our authority while appearing dialogical or participatory.

Showing up requires something else. Showing up requires intellectual seriousness as well as ethical availability. The educator enters the classroom as someone accountable to the material and to the people gathered around it. The educator has to be willing to say what they value and why. The educator has to acknowledge that teaching is shaped by history, commitments, failures, and questions. The educator has to allow lived experience to clarify the material without letting it replace it. The educator has to admit when they are wrong (radical, I know), when they do not know, when a student has seen something they missed, or when the direction of the conversation needs to change.

This is one of the most difficult parts of teaching because showing up asks us to be human in an institution that often rewards professional detachment. The university teaches us to perform competently. The university teaches us to manage vulnerability, regulate affect, translate care into policy, and keep the personal at a safe distance from the intellectual. Some of this is necessary. Boundaries matter. But when distance becomes the dominant posture, the classroom can become sterile. Students encounter information but not relation, expertise but not presence, instruction but not shared intellectual life.

Judith Butler helps me think through this. Butler is a contemporary philosopher and theorist of gender, embodiment, vulnerability, and relationality. Across much of their work, Butler insists that we are not self-contained beings who enter social life fully formed. We are made and unmade through others. We are named by others, recognized by others, misrecognized by others, harmed by others, grieved by others, and sustained by others. Our lives are relational before they are individual.

That matters for teaching. Teaching changes us if we let it. Students are not simply changed by our teaching. We are changed by teaching them. Their questions alter the trajectory of a class. Their examples expose the limits of our own. Their confusion forces us to think more carefully about what we assumed was clear. Their resistance can reveal where our pedagogy has become too settled. Their insight can make visible what the instructor, despite training and preparation, did not see.

To show up is to be open to that undoing. To show up is to accept that teaching is not a one-directional act of formation. Teaching is relational work. Teaching asks us to appear before others not only as experts, but as people committed to learning with and from them. This does not mean abandoning rigor, structure, or authority. Showing up means refusing an understanding of authority that requires the instructor to remain unchanged.

Guanajuato made this plain in ordinary ways. Attending a session and being present for the people around you after the session ends are not the same thing. Visiting a place and acknowledging that one's presence in that place has meaning are not the same thing. The city did not exist for us, yet we were there. We were guests, observers, participants, and beneficiaries of an experience made possible by many forms of labor, hospitality, translation, planning, and local knowledge. Showing up, in that

context, meant recognizing that our presence had effects. Showing up meant refusing the innocence of merely being there.

In global learning, this posture becomes urgent. To show up in a place not home to us means preparing carefully, listening seriously, and resisting the temptation to make another place serve our institutional narratives. Showing up also requires recognizing that humility is not the same as silence, and that openness is not the same as innocence. We arrive with histories, resources, passports, institutional affiliations, and interpretive habits. Showing up means taking responsibility for those conditions rather than pretending we can step outside them.

Showing up also means returning differently. The measure of the experience cannot be only what happened in Guanajuato. The measure must also involve what changes in my teaching at Lehigh, in my relationships with students, in my work with colleagues, and in my engagement with South Bethlehem. If global learning does not alter how we inhabit the places we return to, then it risks becoming a temporary enrichment experience rather than a serious pedagogical and ethical encounter.

This is the part of the reflection (and my experience writ large) that feels most unresolved for me. Writing about showing up is easier than doing it. Saying that teaching should be relational is easier than making oneself genuinely available to relations. Praising vulnerability is easier than practicing it under institutional conditions that can punish openness or convert care into expectation. Students need us to show up, but they also need us to maintain boundaries. Students need us to be honest, but not self-indulgent. Students need us to bring ourselves into the classroom, but not make the classroom about us.

[There is no formula for this. That is part of the difficulty.]

For me, showing up means being more deliberate about the kind of classroom I want to help build. Showing up means making space for students to bring themselves into the work without turning the classroom into therapy or confession. Showing up means being honest about why the material matters. Showing up means taking seriously the laughter, frustration, silence, vulnerability, and difficulty that shape learning. Mentorship, advising, encouragement, challenge, and care are not additions to teaching. They are part of the relational fabric through which teaching becomes possible.

Students also know when we are there. Not merely physically there, but *actually there*. Students know when we are listening and when we are waiting to speak. Students know when a question is real and when it is a prompt. Students know when the classroom has room for them and when the classroom only has room for performance or participation. Students know when the instructor is willing to be surprised.

This is what I want to practice more carefully after Guanajuato. I want to show up not as the possessor of knowledge but as someone responsible for creating the conditions under which knowledge can be shared, challenged, and remade. I want to show up not as a neutral administrator of content but as an educator with commitments. I want to show up not as someone unchanged by teaching, but as someone whose thinking is altered by the students, colleagues, and communities with whom I learn.

Showing up is not charisma, nor is it simply being liked by students. Showing up is a practice of presence rooted in responsibility.

epilogue [returning]

I return from Guanajuato with three postures: slowing down, sitting-with, and showing up.

Even now, listing them in this way risks making them sound more orderly than they are. In practice, they overlap. Slowing down makes sitting-with possible. Sitting-with others changes what showing up requires. Showing up requires the patience to be changed by what one encounters. None of these postures can be completed once and for all. They are not best practices in the thin institutional sense. They are ethical and pedagogical commitments that must be renewed in each class, conversation, place, and encounter.

The fellowship created time outside the ordinary rhythm of the semester to think with colleagues about teaching. The week allowed us to ask what kind of educators we are becoming and what kinds of relationships our teaching makes possible. The week reminded me that pedagogy does not begin only when we stand in front of students. Pedagogy begins in how we move through the world, how we listen, how we receive the presence of others, how we inhabit unfamiliar places, and how we return to the places where we live and work.

I do not want to romanticize the experience. A week in Guanajuato does not resolve the contradictions of global learning, the asymmetries of institutional power, or the pressures of the neoliberal university. But a week can *interrupt* a habit. A week can open a space for renewed attention. A week can remind us that teaching, at its best, is not the transmission of mastery but the shared practice of inquiry among people who are never finished learning how to be responsible to one another.

The task now is to see whether these postures can survive the return: the crowded semester, the inbox, the classroom, the meeting(s), the institutional demand to make teaching legible before it has had time to become meaningful.

That is where the work begins again…