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South Africa As a Dynamic Teaching Experience

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Abstract

Dr. Robert Simons and Dr. Christine Dickinson led a class of Cleveland State University (CSU) students to South Africa to study social justice, housing policy, and the business aspects of eco-tourism and resource extraction in spring, 2018. Despite successful exposure to all these topics, the most intense experience of all revolved around the social justice aspect of “poverty tourism.” This experience generated intense discussion and eventually led to the students donating funds to an education entity in our guide’s community. Black and White students appeared to have different levels of involvement, based in part on personal feelings, but perhaps also related to their feelings about poverty and race. Leading a class to South Africa provided a unique opportunity to explore racial issues in a meaningful context.

Another theme for this article is looking at South Africa’s pace of economic, social, and educational progress, and expectations management in a longer-term view, as one of us (Simons) was in South Africa on a Fulbright scholarship 13 years ago. We share some objective analysis of key indicators in an attempt to assess progress. Economic progress could be better, and we are concerned about the future if reality does not catch up to expectations.

Introduction to our recent teaching trip to South Africa

We led a spring semester 2018 class to Johannesburg, Pilanesberg National Park, and Cape Town in the Republic of South Africa (RSA), taking 14 students of all ranks: urban, business, graduate, undergraduate, and alumni, as well as several students of color (African-American¹ and Hispanic). The course segments we studied included social justice, housing policy, resource extraction, and eco-tourism. We looked at these segments through the lens of RSA's colonial past, the growth and decay of the Apartheid system, and residual social injustice. Our trip took place after the end of the semester, over a two-week period during the South African winter season. Aside from the two instructors, the Urban College Dean and one of the instructor's spouses—both of whom had previously visited South Africa—also accompanied us.

The course was organized as a hybrid (part online, part in-person). We met once a month to cover each of the four course segments and to prepare for the next one. Students read material, participated in online discussions, and prepared and presented topical material to each other during our once-a-month afternoon meetings, which also included a quiz. The students were thus prepared for their visit and were also graded on class participation in certain organized meetings while in South Africa.

Course structure and selected materials

The formal course title is “South Africa Faculty-Led Study Abroad.” The course numbers are UST 493/593, IB 491, and MKT 696.² All sections were three credits. Both authors split the actual grading across assignments, but each was an instructor of record for their respective college sections.

In terms of course resources and readings, we spread the readings over the course of the semester, and supplemented our main texts³ with journal articles, high-level reports, and book chapters,⁴ with liberal use of the Internet for background information and current data. We deliberately limited the number of articles provided to encourage the students to find their own, current sources.

¹ We use the term Black interchangeably with African-American in this article, parallel to the race categories set forth in South Africa.

² UST is Urban Studies, IB is International Business, and MKT is Marketing. The 400-level classes indicate upper-level undergraduate, and 500-600 level classes are graduate.

³ We required the students to read: Thembela Kepe, Melissa Levin, and Bettina von Lieres, eds. *Domains of Freedom: Justice, Citizenship and Social Change in South Africa*. Cape Town: UCT Press, 2016, and Nancy Clark and William Worger. *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*. 3rd edition. London: Routledge, 2016.

⁴ Maano Ramutsindela, Nerhene Davis, and Innocent Sinthumule. “Land Restitution. Diagnostic Report on Land Reform in South Africa.” Commissioned report for High Level Panel on the assessment of key legislation and the acceleration of fundamental change, an initiative of the Parliament of South Africa, September 2016. See also, Aly Karam, and Marie Huchzermeyer. “South African Housing Policy over Two Decades: 1994 – 2014.” In *Domains of Freedom*, Kepe, Levin, and von Lieres (eds.).

Impressions of Dr. Christine Dickinson's first visit to South Africa

I have traveled extensively abroad and have led many prior student study-abroad trips. Still, I share these personal impressions upon arriving in RSA, as well as observations regarding notable reactions on the part of students not encountered during student trips to other nations.

The students and I were both startled and concerned about the severe water shortage in South Africa. Prior to this trip, most of us had never encountered this issue firsthand. It was the subject of many student photos and conversations both prior to and while visiting South Africa. Although travelers to RSA do not generally seem to encounter much actual inconvenience related to the shortage, presumably due to the importance of the tourism sector to the RSA economy, passing by a bank of roped-off sinks and joining lines to access the antibacterial dispenser upon arrival at the airport certainly brought the reality of the situation into focus. Day Zero (the day the water will no longer come out of the spigot) loomed large and was highly publicized. Signage requesting responsible use of water was pervasive throughout the areas affected. Though several of us were already aware of the grim projections regarding the impending urgency of addressing the shortage of this critical natural resource across the globe, we listened as an expert on the topic explained that nearly 200 cities across the world have been classified as highly vulnerable and represent the first wave of cities expected to share some of RSA's Cape Town experience in this regard. Encountering this serious challenge firsthand was a valuable lesson, meeting part of the trip's global educational objectives.

The students and I were both shocked and disturbed by the levels of security required (walls and fences, armed guards, barbed wire, etc.) in government and commercial districts and, perhaps most concerning of all, found to be necessary in just about every residential area we visited. Its existence was a constant reminder of the nation's rocky and sometimes violent past and of its tenuous present. It served as a stark reminder of how "hungry" people (i.e., hungry for food, water, shelter, opportunity, validation, respect, etc.) don't make good neighbors. It reminded us of how those needs demand (for the sake of all of us) remediation and how festering issues can grow and take over a community's mindset, behavior, and one's ability to appreciate the surrounding beauty of a place.

In spite of this, however, we were stunned and impressed with the incredible natural beauty of the nation. There were the beautiful grasslands, flora, and fauna of the interior; their discovery was aided by early morning, afternoon, and night vehicle-safari treks through Pilanesberg National Park. Then there was the jaw-dropping beauty of the mountains and beaches of Cape Town as well as its surrounding areas. The struggle of each South African to own, retain, and preserve a piece of this bountiful and gorgeous country was more fully appreciated by all after having seen some of the grandeur of this nation.

Finally, we were all both amazed by and respectful of the individuals hard at work in creating the incredible size, energy, and resourcefulness of the informal economy of South Africa. Having visited other developing nations, I was personally struck by how in the midst of seemingly desperate circumstances, the cities and settlements we saw were bustling with individuals selling fruits, vegetables, other foods, trinkets, creatively repurposed items, lovely artistic creations, homemade beer (which we were given the opportunity to taste), and even sheep heads. These behaviors were in sharp contrast to other economically struggling nations⁵ I had visited. In the process of trying to make lives for themselves, many of the displaced observed in

⁵ These were eastern European and Central American nations about 10 years ago, and things have changed there since.

South Africa appear to have created homes, schools, and communities with obvious and much-deserved pride. This is not to say that there is not much work to be done in RSA, but the people's resilience, resourcefulness, and a certain kind of resolve—perhaps best described as “people-taking-ownership-of-their-lives-and-not-waiting-around-for-someone-else-to-figure-it-out”—impacted me and seemed to impress my fellow American travelers. These firsthand observations afforded our student travelers very valuable global, economic, and cultural learning.

Dr. Robert Simons' return trip to RSA and capsule of a 2005 Fulbright teaching experience

I was in RSA in 2005 on a six-month Fulbright scholarship and taught South African graduate students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg. I also returned three times to participate in the African Real Estate Society meetings, prior to our most recent class trip in May 2018. When I was at Wits the first time, I taught classes in my home disciplines of property (real estate) and town planning (city and regional planning).

At that time in 2005, after spending 6 months in the country, I believed that the town planning graduate students, whom I was teaching, were about 2½ years behind our CSU students in the ability to do team projects, collect and analyze data, and use Excel and PowerPoint. Their writing skills were comparable to our CSU students. One source of amusement and tension was the capitalism-socialism dichotomy. For example, I raised several thousand dollars in prize funds for an applied in-class project and asked the students to compete for the money based on the quality of their final project presentations. Yet they wanted the funds divided equally regardless of effort. In the end, we compromised.

Further, I felt then and still feel that the key to sustainable, successful, and peaceful growth in South Africa is to manage expectations of economic and social betterment, and that this primarily flowed through opportunities for education. Every time I asked a Black South African under the age of 30 what they wanted, they said access to education. However, I observe today that the number of South African Black teaching staff at Wits and the University of Cape Town is very low. There are plenty of qualified Blacks teaching, but they are Africans from other countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana. The Black South Africans with a doctoral degree are getting bid away by industry. This lack of role models is a concern.

A chance to teach race issues

One exciting and professionally scary aspect of our trip to RSA was the opportunity to focus on race issues with the class, a topic that is very PC-driven and risky for a White professor to undertake in the U.S. In South Africa, chances to use ironic and starkly contrasting race-related incidents as teaching tools were abundant. For example, we were in our touring bus in Johannesburg, and saw a Black person with “Whiteface,” possibly a street actor doing pantomime, but we did not stop to ask. I asked the class if they thought it was racist and then asked them about a parallel: “If a White person in the U.S. would appear in public with “Blackface,” would that be racist?” It generated a great discussion.

Public policy aimed at rebounding from the deleterious effects of Apartheid also offers a recent example for discussions of race and divisiveness. The Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) program in RSA is a race-based system for transfer of wealth from Whites to Blacks,

where about half of company stock is transferred to Blacks in order for the firm to be able to compete for government contracts. Again, analyzing the prioritization of the equity (distribution of wealth and income) and efficiency (creation of wealth and income) aspects of these programs led to spirited discussions and ironic contrasts, especially in light of RSA's urgent need to promote more economic growth.

In another instance, we were on a bus headed to the Cradle of Humankind in Sterkfontein near Johannesburg, where there are recent excavations of early hominid bones from about two million years ago. One of us (Simons, an Anthropology undergraduate major) gave an impromptu lecture to the group, literally on "race" and how it's defined in that academic field. White, Black, Asian, other races, Hispanic ethnicity, common ancestry, and our human commonalities were discussed, as well as both physical and cultural anthropology. The irony is on one hand; the Cradle of Humankind theme is that we are all descended from one common African ancestor yet in the U.S. (and elsewhere), we are divided over social constructs that revolve around race issues and discrimination. It was a fascinating juxtaposition of concepts in examining race issues through a U.S. cultural lens.

While there, we also noticed different reactions to tipping and charity to poor people among Black and White CSU students. We had four African-Americans on the trip, and several of them chose to handle tipping and donations in a more personal way rather than contributing funds to a common student pool. They also reacted differently to poverty in Soweto (Johannesburg) and Langa (Cape Town), and I can only speculate about whether these differences were personal, economic, or based on different perceptions of "White" guilt, indifference, or perhaps embarrassment. This issue was palpable but was left unexplored in the collective sense. Either way, the poverty tourism aspect of the trip, part of our class social justice theme, generated huge amounts of emotion and became a rich topic for discussion and active interaction among students and our South African hosts.

Finally, we were on a Braai (cookout), and were talking in depth with one of our game guides, a 35-year-old Afrikaner who was a wizard about nature and celestial movements. (We were fascinated by the Southern Cross star system.) We then started talking about the phasing out of the Afrikaans language in schools, and got into a spirited discussion about retaining minority culture—whether guilt or innocence for Apartheid is collective or personal. (The guide was a child when Apartheid was canceled). He pleaded, as a member of the White minority, to have his language and culture retained. The majority race roles were reversed. It was almost surreal for an American to experience this conversation.

An indicator-based look at progress since the end of Apartheid

Moving to a more analytical perspective, in this section we look at the passage of time and some key economic, social, and educational indicators in RSA. Has there been any progress, and has it been fast enough?

Overall, crime is still quite high. Despite this and a sluggish economy, the African National Congress (ANC) still runs national government but their winning percentage has dropped from the high 70 percent range in the 1990s to the low 50 percent range this decade. ANC has lost control of several provincial governments. There is a chance that the opposition parties could mount a serious effort this next election cycle.

To make a cross-time comparison and try to gauge progress, the following is a table of 16 economic, social, and educational indicators for RSA. We track them from 1992 when Apartheid was dissolved to the present, with a stop halfway in 2005 when I was in residence at Wits. Then indicators in each category are weighed collectively, and then we give each of the three major categories letter grades, both for the 25 years and since 2005.⁶

Table 1. Table of 16 economic, social, and educational indicators for RSA

	1992	2005	2018 or Latest
Population (Millions)	39.4	48.8	56
Rand/US\$	3	6	13
Employment (Millions)	5.2	6.2	9.8
Unemployment Rate	22.0%	23.6%	27.5%
GDP Growth	1.0%	3.6%	0.6%
HIV/AIDS Infection Rate (% Ages 15-49)	1.0%	16.1%	18.9%
GNI/PC (US\$)	\$ 3,190	\$ 4,900	\$ 5,500
% in Poverty	29.3%	25.0%	18.9%
Inflation Rate	15.0%	7.6	6.8%
Number Enrolled in College (1,000s)	400	700	1100
Black, Number of College Degrees/Year (1,000s)	11	22	50
Life Expectancy (Years)	62.3	52.6	62.8
Primary School Enrollment (% of Eligible Children, Including Held Back and Catch-Up)	105.3%	102.6%	102.8%
% on Internet	2%	14%	54%

⁶ There is no formal rubric for these “grades” but in general: “A” is excellent progress, well above reasonable expectations, which can vary based on degree of difficulty in moving the indicator, either as a stand-alone/absolute indicator, or compared to our experience in other countries. For the economic indicators, they may be based in part on normalized indicators like purchasing power parity of per capita gross domestic product. A “B” grade is at or slightly above expectations, where RSA citizens would not feel unhappy about the status of this factor. A “C” grade is somewhat disappointing, and RSA citizens would get upset about it in the medium run, but not very upset at the moment. A “D” grade is dangerously unsustainable and unacceptable now or in the future.

Report card on economics

Employment has grown faster than population but unemployment remains stubbornly high. The South African Rand has lost a lot of value relative to the U.S. dollar. Inflation is lower but remains high, and GDP growth is moribund. 1992-2018 GRADE: C; Since 2005: C-.

Social report card

The HIV/AIDS infection rate (to the extent that it is actually reported) is very high, but infection growth has stabilized since 2005. We hear no more talk of olive oil curing AIDS, like we did 15 years ago, which is a step in the right direction.

Percent of the population in poverty has decreased nicely, although maybe not as fast as some would like. Life expectancy went down (due in part to AIDS), but has recovered and remains unchanged from 1992 where worldwide mortality rates have decreased somewhat. Internet access has greatly increased but still almost half the nation remains offline. 1992-2018 GRADE: C; Since 2005: B.

Education report card

Primary school enrollments have been stable. University enrollments have more than doubled, and the number of Black university graduates has more than quadrupled but still remains quite low compared to the Black presence in the population. Still, improvements in education are an indicator of hope, especially if people feel they will convert to tangible economic gains. 1992-2018 GRADE: B; Since 2005: B+.⁷

⁷ Sources for Table 1:

<https://data.worldbank.org/country/south-africa?view=chart>

http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=ZAF

http://wenr.wes.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/May17_SAfCP_enrollment-race.png

<https://knoema.com/atlas/South-Africa/Unemployment-rate>

<https://knoema.com/atlas/South-Africa/Poverty-rate>

<https://www.poundsterlinglive.com/bank-of-england-spot/historical-spot-exchange-rates/usd/USD-to-ZAR-1992>

https://books.google.com/books?id=JGxjYJ9ZmCEC&pg=PA192&lpg=PA192&dq=how+many+south+africans+enrolled+in+college+in+1992&source=bl&ots=sho8-aE_vT&sig=cTaMUmQInztnwS7BE9Djn5bJkPw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjDo5TtnevcAhXn6IMKHXAqAOsQ6AEwD3oECAIQAO#v=onepage&q=how%20many%20south%20africans%20enrolled%20in%20college%20in%201992&f=false. table 119

<https://tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/employed-persons>

Summary

We had a great time with the students in South Africa. There was lots to see and experience, but we were always nervous about security. Poverty tourism was the big surprise in that it generated strong emotions and feelings, and was a fine teaching experience.

Because we were able to get at race issues in a less threatening way, this class experience provided a potentially life-altering event with respect to core values and cultural sensitivity.

The cultural immersion was particularly valuable to the student educational experience. Student appreciation for the complexity of the challenges facing South Africans grew and they witnessed, with great respect, the people's resilience evident through vibrant communities and a bustling informal economy. In future iterations of the class, a greater emphasis on smaller-scale economic development (informal economy, microloans, small businesses, etc.) instead of larger-scale infrastructure may be beneficial.

Temporarily living in the midst of a severe water shortage brought this looming ecological global issue into sharp focus and the related university lectures by RSA professors built an appreciation for the potential severity of its consequences.

Upon return to the U.S., students have continued their education by tracking the political, social, and cultural condition of South Africa, sharing articles and discussion with their professors and among themselves, all with an overall attitude of hope for South Africa.

Finally, while some economic, social, and educational progress has been made at the national level, we are concerned that it has not been fast enough to satisfy most South Africans' expectations. This may affect the crime rate on the individual level, and political events and strategies at the aggregated level. For example, there has been talk of appropriating large tracts of farmland without compensation, which could feel good and gain the government political capital in the short term but would also depress foreign investment and be a disaster in the long run. We hope cooler heads prevail. South Africa is definitely a place to watch over the next few years, and we plan to return with other classes in the near future.