Catherine DeJager

CSW60: Faith and Computer Education in the Dominican Republic

Derek Schuurman

January 26, 2019

Reflection Paper

When Helping Hurts taught me several things. I learned about poverty in terms of broken relationships and broken systems, which helped me understand what I saw. I also learned about Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), which encompasses several principles that we learned in When Helping Hurts and is also useful framework for describing the work we did in the DR. A reformed Christian perspective can inform development work and how technology is used.

Broken relationships with other people were seen in terms of Haitian-Dominican relations. Mario talked about that when we went to a historical landmark that was made to honor the founders of the DR and to remember people who participated in the revolutions. He said that Haiti used to be as developed as the DR, but Haiti was colonized by France and the DR was colonized by Spain, so Haiti and DR got caught up in France/Spain conflict. US “protected” DR with colonizers, dictators, and sanctioned assassinations. But when Haiti got independence from France, then Haiti had nobody looking out for them. Dominicans saw themselves as anti-Haitian. It was baked into their identity. They are getting better at developing their own identity (e.g., music) and appreciating Haiti (most people who visit Haiti find their prejudices challenged and come to realize Haitians are pretty great after all). However, there is still much room for improvement. On the way back from the Haitian church we visited, Arys pointed out another nearby church. In a village that is maybe 1 square mile, there are 2 churches - 1 for Haitians, 1 for Dominicans. That was a stark reminder that Haitian-Dominican relations still have a long way to come.

Another situation where we saw brokenness was the case of undocumented Haitian immigrants. The Vicini, Italian immigrants who came to DR for sugar cane, lent money to DR government and asked to be paid back in land. And they won’t sell the land back. So now they are very rich. But they stay rich by exploiting Haitians (bringing in illegal immigrants and not giving them enough. They pay more than nothing and more than the DR government (which if I recall correctly also imported illegal immigrants for sugar cane plantations), but still not enough.) Not only is this a broken relationship with other people, it can also be seen as a broken relationship with creation, because so much land is hoarded by these people that other people, especially the Haitian immigrants, are forced into cramped living quarters with no opportunity for expansion. (We saw those cramped living quarters particularly in the village with the Haitian church.) The government simply doesn’t have land to give people, even if it wanted to. And whoever the land belongs to, it is full of litter - another example of broken relationship with creation.

When we visited La Esperanza, we learned that that neighborhood is where the sugarcane plantations used to be (or still are?), so there are a lot of undocumented Haitians that were brought in for slave labor. Because they are undocumented, these people can’t get work except for selling on the street. But their children can get work, so education is very important. The principal, Kayla, talked about the hard situations in the community. Some girls get married as young as 12 or 13, and she will grab them by the hand and bring them out of those relationships and back to school. Years later, they thank her. She hopes the school can become a technical school so people can gain job skills and improve/impact the community. We saw poverty there in terms of material poverty, broken sense of self because people feel like they can’t get out of their current situation, and broken systems because so many people can’t find jobs.

ABCD is a kind of development. Relief is stepping in and taking care of immediate needs (which is necessary in some cases but can create dependency if relief is done when not necessary or if we are doing things for people or doing things to people instead of doing things with them), rehabilitation is working with people, and development is empowering people. ABCD starts with assets rather than with needs. ABCD has 4 principles.

One: find assets. Asset mapping is finding skills and materials that people have as well as learning their hopes and dreams. We talked to the children in the schools Emanuel and Renacer. We learned that many students (especially upper level) have computers and internet at home, but they use them mainly for searching on the internet and using social media. However, the students in general seemed interested in what we are doing. The 7th grade class in Emanuel wanted to know how we would teach programming, how to deal with viruses, and how to fight hackers. Kids had all sorts of interesting things they wanted to do with computers (e.g., the 11th grader who wants to do fashion design). One of the classes in Renacer was really interested in video games, so we talked about that for a bit. Also, many students said their favorite subject was math. And we got to know the students’ hobbies some as well. We also (in all the schools we went to) looked at the computer rooms in each school we went to to see how the computers were being used and what the teachers were doing. In Renacer, we saw the students doing assignments with spreadsheets using LibreOffice on the pis. While there were some great uses, we also saw challenges of using the computers. Some of the SD cards didn’t work, especially the ones at La Esperanza. Also, SD cards would get stolen, so the teachers had to think of creative solutions for how to secure them.

Two: look for resources and solutions from within. We partnered closely with Sinergia, a local organization. Its mission, as translated from its website, is to “Encourage, strengthen and support the development of leadership and organizations committed to the social and spiritual renewal of people and communities, especially those that are most vulnerable.” It’s important to work with local organizations and to train leaders. That’s one of the reasons we gave our workshops to teachers, rather than going to the students directly. By teaching the teachers, we empower them to adapt and customize based on their knowledge and experience, and they will be able to repeat and adapt lessons in the future, rather than just trying to understand what that outside group taught their students.

Three: build/rebuild relationship among local individuals and institutions. We encouraged the teachers to connect with each other and support each other so that they can work together to use the raspberry pis well and find solutions to their problems by sharing knowledge and experience.

Four: only bring outside resources if local resources are insufficient for pressing needs. We brought raspberry pis in because schools couldn’t buy them in the DR, but the schools still needed to provide their own keyboards, monitors, etc. That way, they have some skin in the game.

A reformed Christian perspective can inform development work and how technology is used. We need to do our part, with God’s help, to focus on redemption: restoring relationships with God, self, others, and creation. Technology is a tool, so we want to make sure we are using it for good purposes (such as education). It’s also important to recognize the concept of sabbath. As Dr. Schuurman said to the teachers, in many cases our devices never rest. But we do need to rest. We need to take a sabbath. So it’s important to take a sabbath from our devices so that they are not controlling us and taking all of our focus and attention.

In conclusion, I learned many things from the textbook and from my experience that I hope to keep in mind in the future.