Mentoring Under Duress: Lessons from the Camino de Santiago and Beyond*

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ABSTRACT
This essay is a first-hand account of a study abroad program I co-led on the Camino de Santiago in May of 2022. It provides an overview of the challenges and hardships associated with mentoring and teaching in an emotionally charged environment like the Camino. The essay argues that the process of mentoring under duress reveals the fault lines that often trouble teachers’ efforts to push, or challenge, their students to move beyond their own perceptions of their limitations. These fault lines are not limited to exceptional contexts like the Camino but rather inhere in pedagogical spaces where students come in with cultural constituted expectations of both the teacher and the subject.

KEYWORDS
mentoring, study abroad, pedagogy, transformation, pilgrimage

Tutelaje bajo presión: lecciones del Camino de Santiago y más allá

RESUMEN
Este ensayo es un relato de primera mano de un programa de estudios en el extranjero que codirigí en el Camino de Santiago, en mayo de 2022. Proporciona una descripción general de los desafíos y dificultades asociados con la tutoría y la enseñanza en un entorno cargado de emociones como el Camino. El ensayo sostiene que el proceso de tutoría bajo presión revela las fallas que a menudo obstaculizan los esfuerzos de los docentes por presionar o desafiar a sus estudiantes para que vayan más allá de sus propias percepciones de

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sus limitaciones. Estas fallas no se limitan a contextos excepcionales como el Camino, sino que son inherentes a espacios pedagógicos donde los estudiantes llegan con expectativas culturales constituidas tanto del profesor como de la materia.

PALABRAS CLAVE
tutoría, estudiar en el extranjero, pedagogía, transformación, peregrinación

Tutoria sob pressão: lições do Caminho de Santiago e além

RESUMO
Este ensaio é um relato em primeira mão de um programa de estudo no exterior que co-liderei no Caminho de Santiago em maio de 2022. Ele fornece uma visão geral dos desafios e dificuldades associados à orientação e ao ensino em um ambiente emocionalmente carregado como o Caminho. O ensaio argumenta que o processo de orientação sob coação revela as falhas que muitas vezes perturbam os esforços dos professores para forçar, ou desafiar, os seus alunos a irem além das suas próprias percepções das suas limitações. Estas divisões não se limitam a contextos excepcionais como o Caminho, mas são inerentes a espaços pedagógicos onde os alunos entram com expectativas culturalmente constituídas tanto do professor como do sujeito.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
mentoria, estudo no exterior, pedagogia, transformação, peregrinação

INTRODUCTION

The well-known proverb, “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink” has a surprisingly long history. It appeared in print as early as John Heywood’s 1546 book of Proverbs A Dialogue containing the number in effect of all the Proverbs in the Englishe tongue where it reads: “A man maie well bring a horse to the water, But he can not make him drinke without he will”. However, the long-running, scholarly website www.phrases.org.uk lists its usage as early as the 1175 Old English Homilies: “Hwa is thet mei thet hors wettrien the him self nule drinken [who can give water to the horse that will not drink of its own accord?].” This idea—that you can thoughtfully lead a person to a desired, beneficial, objective, but you can’t make them partake of that objective—is one that has existed for centuries. As such, the proverb speaks, in part, to a distinctly pedagogical issue: often we—as parents, friends, educators—know, or believe, that we are offering useful or even essential material, but we are ultimately powerless to oblige others to take in the lessons (water) we have set before them.

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This essay proposes to recast this centuries-old truth within the framework of study abroad pedagogy, specifically, a program to walk the Camino de Santiago with students that I have co-led three times, with my colleague Professor Matthew Allar. On three separate occasions, 2016, 2018, and 2022, Professor Allar and I co-led a group of [between twelve and twenty] undergraduate students on a thirteen-day pilgrimage from León to Santiago covering approximately two hundred miles. This essay examines the opportunities but also the distinct challenges that stem from undertaking a pedagogical and mentoring-heavy experience under arduous circumstances. Fundamentally, the issues I raise have to do with what we educators experience when we meet resistance to our well-conceived mentoring efforts. What does resistance to mentoring look like? What consequences does this resistance have for both mentors and mentees, students and teachers? What can we learn from the tug of war that often accompanies mentoring in difficult circumstances?

THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO - A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Camino de Santiago is Europe’s pilgrimage par excellence. Comprised of various routes the primary route is called the French Route because it begins in the French town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, crosses the Pyrenees, and ends in the city of Santiago de Compostela. When scholars and the general public refer to “The Camino” or “The Way,” they are typically referring to the French Route. Pilgrims who walk the entirety of the Camino’s 800km take upwards of 30 days from start to finish, a pilgrimage that often comes with physical pain but also heightened emotional awareness and, in some cases, joy. Although pilgrims hail from widely varied backgrounds, they are all quickly immersed in a unifying, centuries-old tradition that dates to the ninth century when, according to the Catholic Church, the bones of St. James were discovered and overnight became a sacred pilgrimage destination site rivaling Rome and Jerusalem. In the ensuing centuries, the walk to Santiago became one of the most visited pilgrimage routes of medieval and contemporary Europe.

HARDSHIP AND STUDENT SUFFERING ON THE CAMINO

The reflections in this essay stem from two interrelated episodes that occurred during my 2022 pilgrimage with a group of twenty students. Our Camino of thirteen consecutive days of walking began in the city of León, approximately 320km from Santiago. The first episode took place in the small town of Villafranca del Bierzo where we arrived after our fifth day of walking, the culmination of a thirty-two km stage. This long fifth day came on the heels of a similarly strenuous fourth day which, though nominally shorter [29km], featured a long uphill and a steep, punishing downhill. Student pilgrims, like most peregrinos, begin the Camino eager for the road ahead. This two-day period in our thirteen-day pilgrimage is a critical one because it marks a

3 Professor Allar is a good friend and colleague. I did not, however, consult him on this essay. The ideas, opinions, and potential flaws are therefore exclusively my own.
transition in our group’s experience; the honeymoon period ends, and the reality of the Camino sets in. By the fifth day of walking, tendonitis arrives unexpectedly for some, joint and muscle discomfort are palpable, and for many blisters have appeared hampering their every step.

We begin our Camino walking as a group, but by the second day students have the freedom to walk at their own pace and with companions of their choosing. The quickest tend to finish the day's walk by early afternoon, while the slowest arrive some eleven hours after our routine 6:30am departure. Our fifth day’s walk had been long and hot; many of the students arrived in genuine physical discomfort, and, most significantly from a pilgrimage perspective, emotionally spent. Some went off by themselves to cry while others gathered in small groups to complain. Although all twenty students had begun the Camino brimming with joy and excitement the general disposition, for some, had turned from ebullient to taciturn. Frustrated or not, their collective experience over the first five days of walking had manifest one of the well-worn Camino sayings: “there are no easy days on the Camino.”

It is not uncommon to underestimate the Camino. People, but especially young college students, believe that walking all day will be easy. It is not. Many become intimately familiar with another common saying: “the Camino breaks you in order to build you up again.” As an experienced faculty member and peregrino, it was not surprising to me to see several of our students arrive at Villafranca “broken.” What was different, however, from previous trips was just how profoundly dispirited many in our group were. Several students upon arriving retreated immediately to call their parents and to share their despair, and if we had offered to airlift them out of Villafranca I suspect some would have taken us up on the offer. Put differently, despite beginning this experience with the sense that they were going on a once-in-a-lifetime adventure, several were ready to quit after just a few days. Hanging over our arrival on that fifth day was a resentful anger I had never experienced.

Throughout the years, Professor Allar and I have developed a clear protocol for preparing students that includes several presentations on the precise physical and emotional challenges they can expect to encounter on the Camino. We hear from a Kinesiologist on the rigors of the Camino, watch a documentary on the physical and emotional challenges, and we take the students on a five-mile practice hike to ensure they have begun to break in their intended footwear. Despite these advanced preparations, there was an unmistakable sense among many of the students that this journey was harder than they expected and harder than we had let on; despite our usual, well-established pre-pilgrimage protocol their suffering had somehow become “our fault.” It is under these complex circumstances that I learned the hard truths about mentoring that form the foundation for this essay.

**STUDY ABROAD AND THE GROWING INTEREST IN THE CAMINO AS CURATED SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE**

The sociologist Kay Jenkins’s 2021 book, *Walking the Way Together*, offers an overview of the Camino’s centuries-long history and its enduring appeal to contemporary pilgrims. She writes:
Sacred travelers sought a closer relationship to God, forgiveness for past sins, a cure for some disease, or perhaps a divine favor: ‘Can I be justified as a child of God? Will my leprosy be cleansed? Will we be granted a son or daughter?’ Today the Camino de Santiago (in English, the Way of St. James, or just the Way), like many pilgrimages, may entail religious motivations, but it is widely understood in a broader way as a spiritual experience (xviii).

Jenkins underscores the Way as an extension of the pilgrim’s aspirations for a better life now and for eternity. Moreover, while the religious overtones of the Camino have softened over the last few centuries allowing for a wider range of motivations, the heart of the Camino remains closely connected to a spiritual experience that many, perhaps most, pilgrims assume will have a significant impact on their post-Camino lives. If today’s pilgrims do not necessarily expect religious miracles per se they do, by and large, expect some “spiritual” magic.

Despite its near disappearance just a few decades ago, and its more recent exponential resurgence, this broadly defined sense of spirituality helps to explain the Camino’s exceptional longevity. Maryjane Dunn, scholar, and pilgrim, details this resurgence from a quantitative perspective:

The yearly numbers of registered pilgrims between 1870 and 1884 never reached above double digits... During the 1970s (except for the 1971 Holy Year) the number of pilgrims receiving the Compostelana never exceeded 250 and in many years did not reach triple digits, but there was a growing international interest in recreating the medieval walking pilgrimage... The number of persons earning the Compostela has not been below five digits since 1994 and has not fallen below six digits since 2006 (21-22).

Although the 300,000+ pilgrims that walked the Camino in 2022 pale in comparison to the millions of Muslim pilgrims who undertake the hajj every year, or the millions of Hindu pilgrims who gather for the Prayag Kumbh Mela, the exponential growth in the past three decades speaks to a burgeoning sense of the Camino as an essential pilgrimage. Although Dunn does not mention them here, part of this exponential growth has been inspired, in part, by the growing presence of pilgrimage in the Western cultural imaginary. Cultural texts like Paulo Coelho’s The Pilgrimage (1995), Shirley MacLaine’s The Camino: A Journey of the Spirit (2000), and Emilio Estevez’s film The Way (2010) have introduced pilgrimage to audiences who might not have otherwise understood themselves as potential pilgrims.

This explosion of interest in the Camino has dovetailed with the steady rise in interest in study abroad programs. Universities (and in some cases secondary schools) across the United States have committed themselves to the idea that international study is beneficial to their general student body. William and Mary, for example, publicizes proudly that “more than 55% of all undergraduates study abroad in their W&M careers.” In a dissertation on faculty

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4 The term Compostelana has been identified as being a misnomer, one that has gained traction among pilgrims. The official term, the Compostela, is a certificate issued by church authorities in Santiago. It is, essentially, a certificate of accomplishment that certifies that the pilgrim has either walked at least 100km or biked at least 200km on the Camino de Santiago.
experiences on the Camino, Ben Boone examines the development of study abroad programs across U.S. institutions. “In the 2016-17 academic year alone, 332,727 students—292,467 of them undergraduates—traveled abroad to earn academic credit (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2018)” (6). In the hundred years since the first University-sponsored study abroad program in 1923, study abroad has grown exponentially and with it a concomitant impact on the Camino. According to Boone, “In the summer of 2018, no fewer than 20 U.S.-based institutions sponsored faculty-led study abroad programs in northern Spain that spend some amount of time on the Camino” (6).

This sudden increase in university-sponsored programs on the Camino is easy to understand from a pedagogical standpoint. The Camino presents faculty with an unrivaled opportunity to connect their students to pilgrims from across the globe, many of whom embody profoundly distinct cultural practices and even social values. Additionally, the long hours of contemplation afford students (and faculty) time to consider course materials in ways that have little in common with the break-neck speed of the traditional academic semester. Boone’s research into faculty-led Camino programs reveals several important observations about just how non-traditional the Camino pedagogical experience can be. He writes that pilgrims:

... may partake in the traditions and daily rituals of the community, which include washing, foot care, shoe mending, cooking, eating, sleeping, cleaning—all activities that take place far outside the bounds of the traditional faculty role in U.S. institutions of higher education... Faculty who lead these programs not only teach content as they would in any course; they manage logistics of walking for weeks on end, ensure their students are physically prepared, and accept and embrace the role of pilgrim alongside their students. (9).

As Boone attests, students and faculty are obliged to reckon with the innate humanness of one another in ways that are distinct from the traditional classroom. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is notable that faculty perform the many additional tasks laid out by Boone while simultaneously teaching an academic subject reflective of their expertise. Most importantly, faculty members take on these additional responsibilities while they are also walking the Camino. This means that, in effect, they are trying to handle the many, often competing, needs of their students while simultaneously experiencing, firsthand, the litany of physical challenges and the emotional vulnerability associated with walking hundreds of miles in a matter of weeks.

The Camino as Complex Pedagogy

Considered within a pedagogical framework, and in part because of the litany of unique challenges that inhere, teaching on the Camino is unrivaled as an opportunity to step away from the limitations imposed by the confines of traditional settings. In their introduction to Mentoring the Mentor, Paulo Freire and his co-editors offer the following commentary on the extant contradictions between “educators and students, between mentors and those who are mentored:”
Traditional pedagogy, in the simplest terms, operates from the position that the teacher or mentor is presumed to know and the learner to ‘know not’ and therefore the teacher must transfer or export knowledge to the learner who ‘receives’ learning in a manner that denies the validity of the ontological and epistemological productions of the learner and the learner’s community. This is an authoritarian, manipulative, ‘banking’ pedagogy, which negates the possibility of democracy and distorts the lived experiences of the learners who are silenced and denied the opportunity to be authors of their own histories (xiv-xv).

The denial of ontological or epistemological validity to certain communities has been the hallmark of an education system that reproduces the status quo at the expense of marginalized communities. I would like, however, to foreground Freire’s insight into the ‘banking’ model of pedagogy as a mode of unidirectional teaching predicated on a hierarchical, one-way transference of knowledge from teacher to student. Even at W&M—the nation’s oldest public, liberal arts university—where we place a premium on exceptional teaching, the built environment suggests a continued adherence to traditional unidirectional modes of instruction. Lecture style auditoriums with fixed, immobile seats facing the instructor are the norm, and Socratic, seminar-style classrooms can be difficult to come by. In this way, even the built environment frustrates teaching that attempts to counter the banking model of pedagogy.

More significantly, the success that W&M students enjoy in traditional modes of learning amplifies their investment in those same modes of teaching and learning. For example, the average SAT score for incoming 2024 students is approximately 1380 with an average weighted GPA of 4.27 out of 5. I would posit that these figures suggest a cohort of students conditioned by their success, in precisely this kind of unidirectional teaching/learning, to expect a learning model that relies heavily on the top-down export of knowledge that has already worked for them. Efforts to democratize the classroom through critical dialog, thoughtful ambiguity, and student-driven pedagogy do exist but are often overshadowed by the demand for disciplines that favor “export” teaching that confirm students’ expectations of what learning is “supposed to look like”.

Because the rigors of the Camino enable an opportunity for emotional and physical vulnerability across a wide range of sociocultural interactions, transcending the banking/export model of teaching and learning—either in full or in part—becomes possible but only to those willing to hold space for the uncertainty associated with the myriad challenges it offers. As Freire suggests, “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students (72).” The challenge of the Camino is mutually constitutive in that as much as the student needs

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5 I am indebted to one of the reviewers of this essay who keenly pointed out the stark disjunct between success in grades and test scores versus actual, substantive learning, the kind of learning that ultimately opens the door to transformation. The topic, an essential one, is simply too big to unpack here; however, it bears mentioning that my claim here is not that W&M students’ have been conditioned to conceptualize “transformative learning” along specific ways, but rather, and perhaps in complete opposition, that many have been conditioned to perceive success in grades and test scores as synonymous with transformative learning.

6 Example: one day after a lengthy, energetic, class session debating the US’s reliance on consumer spending, a student in my class exasperatedly raised her hand and demanded, “Can you just tell me, is shopping good or bad!! Am I supposed to like it or not!?”
to understand that the mentor does not, cannot, have all the answers (despite fervent student
desire that instructors do, in fact, have the answers), so too it requires pedagogical humility on
the part of the mentor to acknowledge, under duress, that they cannot have all the answers
despite any previous experience (and concomitant wisdom) they might possess and despite a
sincere desire to be there unconditionally for their students.

**CAMINO PEDAGOGY AND THE WEIGHT OF “PILGRIMAGE”**

beyond the complexities of the logistics and the physical and emotional labor, the
challenges that typify “Camino pedagogy” stem in part from the heavy expectations that inhere
in the very concept of pilgrimage. Students and faculty that make the decision to teach and learn
on the Camino do so with multiple, competing notions of what it means to be a *pilgrim*. Boone’s
research into Camino study abroad programs highlights the expectations that accompany any
program offering a pilgrimage experience:

... while [students] are on the Camino, they gain exposure to people, cultures, and ideas
from all over the world. Many of the U.S.-based Camino study abroad programs emphasize
the cultural exposure, physical demands, and *transformational nature* of the Camino as
opportunities unique to this genre of study abroad (4, emphasis added).

Boone points out the tendency among US-based Camino programs to self-select students
drawn to this “trinity” of opportunities for cultural exposure, physical challenge, and the
possibility of transformation. My emphasis, however, is on the baseline expectation among most
pilgrims that transformation of self is a central aspect of their Camino experience.

The Camino scholar Samuel Sanchéz y Sanchéz, writing on the connection between
material culture and transformation, addresses how broadly defined “sacred experiences”
reconfigure the physical Camino into something more profound. He argues that “.... on their
path to transformation, pilgrims seem to privilege the intangible and the incorporeal by focusing
on an invisible inner journey for which their visible physical journey becomes a metaphor, a
means to achieve change and transformation” (147). Sanchéz y Sanchéz’s then elaborates on the
emotional demands inherent to the act of pilgrimage suggesting that “There are as many ways
to think about the Camino as pilgrims who walk along this sacred path. At the core of all these
ways, however, lies the courage of individuals to engage in an extraordinary physical journey to
search for themselves” (156). Sanchéz y Sanchéz’s invocation of “courage” as a necessary quality
to move from journey to transformation spotlights crucial ideas with important ramifications for
pedagogy writ large.

To understand this intimate relationship between courage and transformation, we
must first come to terms with another Camino truth: “Everyone walks their own Camino.” This
phrase, repeated frequently among pilgrims, emphasizes that there is no “right or wrong” way
to walk the Camino: Some carry more, some less. Some walk quickly, others amble. Some stay
in municipal albergues, others in hotels. The pain and potential transcendence of the Camino does not distinguish. Sánchez y Sanchéz’s essay, however, asserts that although not necessarily the “right” or “only” way to experience the Camino, there is an expectation that true pilgrims—“by focusing on an invisible inner journey for which their visible physical journey becomes a metaphor”—will, in fact, “achieve change and transformation”.

This expectation that peregrinos will experience transformation on their journey has become central to perceptions associated with the Camino’s resurgence. For lack of a better word, the Camino has been “branded” as an opportunity for transformation. Although Jenkins doesn’t use this specific language in her research on families who undertake the Camino together, she articulates how this branding of the Camino is intertwined with more recent Western cultural values like “self-care” and “resilience:”

Contemporary families in Western culture also feel the pressure of a therapeutic culture that values self-work and emotion-work in the service of intimate others. Parents feel the weight of expectations to help young adult children build emotional strength for future success in careers and relationships, and young adults hold fast to the idea that self-work in various forms will help them be competitive, retool, and build emotional fortitude in an economy with increasing employment insecurities and rising costs of living (xvii).

For W&M students, the rigors of the Camino Program—intellectual, academic, physical, but also emotional—coalesce around a narrow interpretation of self-work that offers them the opportunity to increase their stores of ‘emotional fortitude’. Although few would argue that having emotional fortitude is a negative quality, this idea—that one can “possess” and, as such, “have more of it”—harbors the risk of converting emotional resilience into a commodity that, like many job market skills, can be both quantified and readily purchased. Although this is a crass overstatement of how most pilgrims conceptualize transformation on the Camino, I would conjecture that the 2022 W&M students, to one degree or another, unwittingly pre-conceptualized their experience on the Camino as an “investment” that would benefit their future selves by increasing their culturally defined sense of emotional fortitude.

Taken collectively these commentaries signal that the Camino is not a neutral, value-free proposition. Influenced to varying degrees by the growing cultural discourse about what the Camino means, students arrive with a set of expectations about what will “happen” to them on the Camino and who they might become via the transformative nature of pilgrimage. This notion should have resonance with teachers of all types, for who among us has not experienced a classroom laden with external and internal expectations that a subject is, for example, “important and beneficial”—and therefore worthy of attention—or a similarly loaded expectation that a class is “pointless and unnecessary”. Unavoidably, students come to our pedagogical work predisposed to shape their experience in ways that are often not within our control.

7 Study abroad as an “investment” undoubtedly complicates pilgrimage. The fact that W&M students pay approximately $7000 for the experience is significant: 1) it makes the journey a literal investment, 2) it brings to light the enormous issue of relative privilege. Most pilgrims have not spent anywhere near the sum that University students pay in part because students are also paying for college credit. It’s a complicated topic that far exceeds the bounds of this essay, but the privilege and potential entitlement of university students able to pay for pilgrimage feels deeply relevant.
Reflections on Failed (?) Mentorship

Returning to the moment of our arrival at Villafranca del Bierzo, it is undeniably true that the students, and I, suffered greatly that day. Under exhausting conditions fatigue runs high, and patience runs low. The sense of defeat and frustration but also resentment among the group was notable and urged us, as faculty members, to react. Later, after everyone had showered and eaten a beautiful family-style dinner, we gathered the group. I asked them to look at the many pilgrims—all of them older and in some cases significantly older—who, on aching muscles and blistered feet, hobbled up and down the stairs. I asked the students to consider this shared, mutual suffering. We were all suffering physically; yet, whereas many of us looked miserable and defeated, these older pilgrims looked happy, joyful. I asked our students to consider some important questions: Why the stark difference between our group and the others? Why were many of us despondent while others emanated blissful exhaustion? After a long, deeply uncomfortable silence, I posed to the students that, as so much literature on happiness suggests, much of our experience on the Camino would be dictated by how we chose to experience the Camino. More concretely, our attitude towards the inevitable and essential suffering of the Camino would have a profound impact on how we experienced—and what we gained or didn’t—from that inescapable suffering.

My argument was that many of us were unhappy because we were mired in our own physical suffering. I suggested, emphatically but empathetically, that it would be more helpful if we stopped focusing on what was wrong and tried instead to focus on gratitude. This strategy worked brilliantly on the 2016 and 2018 Caminos; the group, having shifted their attention away from their physical suffering, began to experience Camino values like gratitude, sharing, joy, and community, effectively reshaping their collective experience.

My suggestion, however, had no discernable effect on the 2022 group and leads to the second episode I’d like to consider. Having walked 185 of our intended 200 miles, we were approaching the end of our Camino. During that evening’s reflection most of our group still seemed single-mindedly concerned with their physical discomfort. I sat uncomfortably, even a bit angrily, and listened to students again talking about their knee pain, the heat, and their thirst.

8 In all three Camino programs, I have taught a cultural studies course entitled “Hike and Seek” that studies happiness by engaging works that deal with human happiness. During the above conversation with the 2022 group, I invoked Richard O’Connor Happy at Last and Tal Ben-Shahar’s Happier, both of which make the argument that a sizable portion of our happiness is a product of how we choose to deal with certain realities. These ideas were met with great enthusiasm by the students before our walk...

9 The evidence for this is largely anecdotal—perhaps thin for the discerning reader—but, in my mind, no less significant. Our nightly reflections—which were the most consistently “pedagogical” moments we shared—gradually shifted in focus from the physical pain that we continued to wrestle with to moments of human connection. Students described interactions with other pilgrims—short, meaningful conversations held throughout the day—while their nightly expressions of gratitude centered on exchanges with one another: the gift of learning about each other as people, as well as small acts of kindness like a shared snack, an uplifting comment during a difficult climb, or the reminder to stop for a moment and simply “feel” their present moment on the Camino. It was a shift that didn’t ignore the physical pain but did allow for a recognition of, and an appreciation for, a fuller, broader Camino experience.
Hardly a mention of the pilgrims they had met, the transcendence of a simple meal, the stunning views, the sense of accomplishment, or the gratitude to be participating in this experience. Frustrated, I pointed out how redundant this narrative had become; I repeated my belief that the narrative of our own suffering was shaping our experience of the Camino, no, worse, was limiting our experience of what the Camino could be. Then came something I had never experienced on the Camino: a public rebuke from a student. “Iliana,” as we’ll call her, explained sharply that some of us simply have a different relationship to our physical pain and that I was invalidating their suffering by demanding they ignore their pain. Iliana made it clear that she was choosing to focus on her pain and that I had no business telling her to do otherwise.

It was a painful moment, one that was new to my experience on the Camino but also to my life as an accomplished educator. What made the incident more painful was that it felt as if the group, by and large, agreed with her. Rather than an isolated individual complaint, the group seemed to catalog my efforts as overbearing, unnecessary, and intrusive.

At the time, I was incapable of drawing on the insight of others, but in retrospect I find that the work of Janneke Peelen and Wilson Jensen—particularly their analysis of the process of pilgrimage—has helped to clarify the essence of my frustration. Peelen and Jensen contend that “A spiritual or religious dimension of the journey, in the first instance, is not important for all pilgrims. Many pilgrims, however, who started el camino out of historical interest or as a physical challenge later report that there was something more, a deeper level to their journey” (82). Later in that same essay on “emotive movement,” they examine the discoveries shared by an interviewee:

A female pilgrim from Canada narrated her experiences in the Pyrenees, how within a single hour she experienced a multitude of emotions, ranging from complete desperation and fear to joy and utmost happiness. This kind of experience on el camino has a long-lasting impact on pilgrims. Going through those kinds of experiences and reflecting on their feelings result in a better self-understanding” (86).

My experiences as a pilgrim had taught me to cherish the enormous, human range of emotions that can visit pilgrims in a startlingly brief span. The rush of competing emotions like pain and sorrow but also joy and elation, don’t necessarily develop over long stretches of time or distance, instead, a single hour can be charged with multiple emotions; it is the aggregate of those “single hours” that can lead, as Peelan and Jensen put it, to “better understanding.” Retrospectively, my frustration with Iliana’s attitude was the feeling that she, and others, were inadvertently limiting the full range of emotional and transformative possibilities of the Camino.

It is worth asking why my students’ rejection of my mentorship was so painful and frustrating. Some of it was undoubtedly ego, for despite my Freirean intentions, letting go of hierarchies of knowledge and experience is hard. However, it is also fair to say that it was (is) an ego rooted in a desire to teach and mentor in the most honest way. I designed my course on happiness, in conjunction with the pilgrimage, to help students find meaning, and even peace, within the everyday pressures that accompany attending a rigorous top-ranked institution. With these pedagogical goals firmly in mind, the suffering of the Camino was an integral component of
that experience. In designing the pilgrimage portion of the Camino program, it was the suffering and the transcendence of that suffering that played the most important role, more important even than the modest lessons I offered in conjunction with the texts we read.

Moreover, my frustration during the 2022 Camino centered on the feeling that despite my full commitment to the philosophy that “everyone walks their own Camino,” my students were doing it wrong. This is a complicated notion and difficult to confess: on the one hand, my mentorship could be interpreted as overbearing and overly critical. Seen in these terms, I had no business telling my students how they should walk and what they should feel. Painful as it might be, this is a legitimate critique that I have tried to accept. On the other hand, as a teacher and a mentor committed to my students’ learning and growth, I am equally aware of the Camino as an unrivaled opportunity whose short, thirteen-day window of time gave the entire experience a pronounced urgency. These two competing narratives—the belief that all pilgrims are free to walk their Camino and the belief that the Camino represents a unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for growth—were set against each other in notable, definitive tension. The result was, sadly, deeply frustrating for everyone.

As I reflect on this experience, I’ve come to two modest conclusions. The first is that my desire to flatten hierarchies, particularly on the Camino, was a sincere one. But what became clear to me, only after months of frustrated reflection, was just how difficult it is to sustain a flattened hierarchy. In one sense, my colleague Professor Allar and I were experts; we had concrete knowledge and experience about the Camino to impart on our students even as we acknowledged the need for pilgrims to learn certain lessons for themselves. The students, though, were often similarly contradictory in their desires for a flattened hierarchy; they wanted (demanded) to be free to experience things as they saw fit while also, constantly, seeking support, information, and even approbation. It was, despite our efforts, a perpetually contradictory experience.

My second realization is an acknowledgment of just how profoundly my own mental and emotional state influenced my ability to be the best version of a Camino teacher. It was not easy for me to see this in the moment, and, in truth, it is not easy now, some twenty months later. The pandemic left me as emotionally spent as it had my students. My patience was threadbare, my stores of compassion less readily accessible, and my ability to let their frustrations and disappointments play out without affecting my own experience of the Camino was virtually non-existent. Consequently, I made the well-intentioned mistakes of 1) believing that my own previous experiences gave me the “authority” to guide their experiences along a particular track, and 2) wanting their experience to necessarily be one of joy and accomplishment.10 Neither of these desires are, in glaring honesty, particularly Freirean. They share Freire’s deep, abiding respect for the student, and, concomitantly, a clear understanding of the enormous responsibility of
the teacher. But I was unable to transcend my own, very human, limitations (both physical and emotional) to practice what I had preached.

Modestly, I suggest that this larger episode offers teachers of all types a glimpse into the pressure that mentors put on themselves as they seek to help their mentees achieve something difficult. In my case, my perception of my role as mentor was framed by my belief that the obsessive focus on physical pain was denying my students the opportunity to see and experience the many gifts the Camino had to offer. Although unable to recognize it at the time, my efforts to push them to think past their pain were deeply connected to my interpretation of mentoring. The collaborative text *Mentoring the Mentor*, with its focuses on Freire’s enduring commitment to the art of mentorship, elegantly articulates this complicated dynamic:

> The romanticization of the student, sometimes done most inappropriately in the name of Paulo Freire, has led too many educators to abandon their responsibility for bringing the best that they have to the teaching-learning process. The result has been too many instances of miseducation from which supposedly idealistic educators have excused themselves from any degree of responsibility” (xv).

Their emphasis on our responsibility as educators foregrounds essential notions of mutual respect that include leveling the hierarchy of the classroom and a renewed commitment to mentoring. I would argue that, additionally, Freire calls for a more subtle manifestation of responsibility, one that demands we be willing to mentor our students in assertive and potentially uncomfortable ways. I am not, to be clear, calling for hazing or the clichéd ideal of “tough love.” I am, however, suggesting that circumstances can, and often do, dictate that we lean on our experience as educators to guide our students to a transcendence that often awaits on the other side of discomfort. This is true of many fields, but as a professor of Latinx and Ethnic Studies, I have found that this is particularly true of disciplines that oblige students to deal with the many suppressed histories that inhere within issues of race, colonialism, and justice.

**Concluding thoughts or why does this matter?**

It is my hope that this story about the challenges of mentoring under the adversity of the Camino offer a larger lesson about the complicated nature of pedagogy and mentorship. It is not lost to me that this is potentially a story of an isolated, highly privileged educational opportunity. In a historical moment that has seen record number of migrants— some walking the length of Central America and Mexico to the US, others crowding onto impossibly overloaded, terrifyingly dangerous “ships” to make the journey from Africa to Greece—the choice to walk for leisure, for mere reflection and not survival, is the epitome of privilege. And yet, the idea at the heart of this essay is the reality that as educators we often believe we know best. We are cognizant that the lessons we offer our students—be it a two-hundred-mile opportunity for reflection, writing instruction, challenging math problems, or basic language instruction—are important. These lessons aim to give students precise skills but also afford them an opportunity to improve critical
thinking, resilience, or basic human empathy. As such, the lessons we hold out to our students transcend the topics from which they originate.

The frustration I have laid bare is primarily about the frustration that comes from our flawed but human efforts to lead students to an understanding of educational opportunities as transcending mere subject matter. Education everywhere is in crisis from a persistent lack of funding, a student body (like the teaching body) reeling from the ongoing effects that technology addiction has had on our ability to focus, and an educational system marked by merciless standardization that has left love-of-learning withering on the branch, yellowed, desiccated and desperate for the water that is creativity and free expression. It is my contention that renewed, sincere attention to mentorship offers us the hope of resisting and even upending some of these many challenges.

REFERENCES


John “Rio” Riofrio