

Negotiating a Culture on Its Own Terms: The Role of Experiential Education

Keynote Address

Conference “Fostering Global Citizenship in Higher Education: Strategies for Campus-Wide Collaboration” Sponsored by the School for International Training, the International Partnership for Service-Learning & Leadership, and Vermont Campus Compact

Brattleboro, Vermont, November 30, 2007

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Defining Global Citizenship

Let me begin in a spirit of full disclosure. I served on the board of World Learning for almost ten years. So I have seen SIT’s programs up close and I know how effective they are in challenging students to abandon their prejudices and look at the world anew.

I have been associated with the International Partnership for Service-Learning for most of its history, and I have observed how the IPSL’s programs allow for a kind of total cultural immersion that is not possible in more conventional programs.

I have been involved in the administration and oversight of study abroad (besides having ended up in this country in that way) on and off since the 1970s, and I have watched the gradual evolution of what might be called the study-abroad sector over that period into the industry that it is today.

As a speaker of Esperanto, I learned as a teenager about entering another culture having checked my English language and, as far as possible, my British and American preconceptions, at the border. These experiences also taught me about the importance of language learning.

Particularly in this last capacity, I have also listened to my share of diatribes against the United States, about our closed-mindedness, our arrogance, our loudness, our apparent belief that the rest of the world is somewhere between Disneyland and a sandbox.

So, for me, thinking about global citizenship in a rational way may be hard to do: I am suffering from experiential overload. Besides, it’s a slippery term, borrowed from notions of citizenship education in an American context (where citizenship, like leadership, or even like liberal education, is simply not a notion internationally understood). We know that it is important to teach our young people to engage themselves in their own society in constructive ways, to have them vote, to have them care about others, to have them know and understand the United States

Constitution, the Bill of Rights. But what does engagement with the world look like? Is global citizenship simply U.S. citizenship writ large -- a *global* belief in the need to vote, a *global* belief in engagement in the society, a *global* belief in the United States Constitution, a *global* belief in the Bill of Rights? Presumably not.

Is it a knowledge of the planet and a determination to work through our own system of government here in the United States to make our government and our people more responsive to human needs? Is it an awareness of the relativity of our values, an understanding that other people live according to other values? Or must that relativism be tempered by an awareness that not every way of organizing communities across the world is equally good? How do we feel about the consequences of naming teddy-bears Muhammad? How do we feel about child soldiers in Sierra Leone? Do we simply respond that such things are comprehensible in context, and that intolerance is a branch of human biology? Presumably not. So do we affirm certain values and hold to them?

And, above all, in this context, how do we go about teaching this thing called global citizenship, and having our students learn about it? What are our values and how do we discover them?

I have no clear answer to these questions, though I do believe that there exists at least an aspirational consensus around the formulations of international human rights, laid out, for example, sixty years ago and in some measure enshrined in international law. But none of this is simple. Terms like “global citizenship” are rhetorical stances, often ideologically determined. We use them to convince the unconvinced, to make it look as though we have answers. Perhaps all that matters for the students under our charge in foreign countries is trying to understand – trying to find the inner workings of other societies, to figure out how they function, why they function. If we can couple that with sheer knowledge – about the world as a whole, its physical characteristics and its geography and its demography – we can leave them to take the next step, which, if we have a grant proposal to write or a conference to attend, we can call global citizenship.

Study Abroad

Personally, I am much more interested in the means than I am in the ends. If we can create an environment in which students’ highest aspirations are met, in which they are obliged to break at least in part with the cultural values with which they are familiar, and in which they can, to the greatest extent possible, listen rather than speak, question rather than answer, we will at least have created the right conditions for international learning.

But there are formidable obstacles. They begin, oddly enough, in the drive to internationalization now in motion on so many of our campuses. My own sense in talking with senior administrators in many institutions is that there is only a very slender sense of what internationalization entails – both its purpose and what resources are required to achieve it. Recently, study abroad has come in for a great deal of scrutiny from the public and the press, fed in part by high-profile investigations of possible wrongdoing by providers. While most of these allegations have proven unfounded, the fact remains that program design is often given

insufficient attention by some in the field, and that students often see study abroad not as an opportunity to learn but as an opportunity to stop learning. One such story, excellent fodder for the outrage that sells newspapers, appeared in the Hartford Courant this very day.

Last time there was a drive to internationalization – in the 1960s and 1970s – the process began in the idealism of the Kennedy years, an idealism tempered by competitiveness (Sputnik in 1957 and the Cuban missile crisis a few years later were elements in it), but also driven by a sense that the world was opening up, as the processes of decolonization got into motion in the late 1950s, development aid was channeled to newly independent countries, and, under Kennedy, the Peace Corps was founded. SIT was in part a child of that idealism, brought into being to provide training for Peace Corps volunteers.

The assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and the dark years of the Vietnam War turned the idealism into something more defensive. We sold internationalization to our institutional leaders in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a simple necessity: the United States needed to be competitive, and it needed to avoid disasters such as Vietnam or the Iranian hostage crisis. The Peace Corps gradually professionalized, and gradually became more tied to American foreign policy; the students of the 1980s learned that greed was good and that American freedom of the individual meant the freedom to make as much money as possible and then keep it.

This time around, we have started where we left off. The 9/11 disaster has made us fearful. We know that we must engage with the world either to counter the ill-feeling that abounds in it against Americans, or to maintain our position of superiority. Idealism seems dead.

It seems particularly dead in the environment of study abroad (not, I hasten to add, among those who turn up to conferences like this one, but in the larger higher education community). In our efforts to move ever larger numbers of students abroad, we are shortening the amount of time that they spend out of the country, we are trying to make their academic experience abroad as easily transferable (and hence as little changed from home) as possible, we are concerned as never before with safety (knowing that our increasingly demanding students and their increasingly demanding parents are all too ready to pounce on us if we are not), we want to give our students as many of the advantages and amenities as they have at home (air conditioning, gyms, and the rest). In short, one thrust of study abroad is to make it as indistinguishable from study at home as possible. Under those circumstances, it's so much easier to sell to curriculum committees and to people in charge of credit transfer. Currently making its way through Congress is the Lincoln Commission's recommendation that we send a million students abroad annually – up from the current number of around 220,000. Where will they go? What kind of experience will they have? What is absolutely clear is that, while it will serve the admirable purpose of democratizing study abroad, it will require more compromises than many of us are yet ready to make.

[Of course, if we go with the IIE's minimum of ten days abroad in order for a student to be counted as having studied abroad, that means that ten students will spend a total of 100 days abroad – about the amount of time required for one student to study abroad for a semester. So maybe the total amount of American time spent abroad will not increase at all, and the aggregate

American body mass displaced to foreign locations will stay the same, though the quick turnaround will be good for the airline industry....]

Additional factors undermining the totality of the study abroad experience are the fact that more and more universities are offering programs in English (a mixed blessing) and more and more institutions are remaking their programs along American lines. Living in an English-language and American-culture bubble is becoming increasingly easy.

Overshadowing all these other factors is the phenomenon of connectivity. For the most part we see such connectivity as a menace. It's hard to work with students in Delhi who are calling their mothers every day, or with students in Bangkok who call home every time they run into something they don't understand. And if we take away their cell phones, that creates other problems. On the other hand, connectivity facilitates the coordination of academic activities in the field with academic expectations at home. While it may obstruct total immersion, it may actually open up new possibilities for connecting learning by experience with the fulfillment of academic programs on the home campus.

Continuity and Engagement

Faced with all of this, what can we do? I give you a paradox.

First, we should rethink study abroad not as a once-in-a-lifetime experience but as the beginning of an ongoing engagement with the world. If we go abroad to learn a language, we learn it for life; so it should be with study abroad. As professionals, we know that pre-departure orientation matters; but perhaps we need to examine student experience at home so that it becomes a kind of ongoing pre-departure orientation, an ongoing addressing of international difference. I know about the notion that study abroad is a life-changing experience; I know how important and how embedded in American culture is the belief in conversion (we are a nation of born-again). But perhaps it is time to think about study abroad as something altogether more normal, as an opportunity to test out what we have learned at home, as a chance to re-examine our values, not once but many times, not suddenly and definitively, but as part of a process. Life as pre-departure orientation? The pious among us might say that it already is.

Second, we should look for more and better ways of engaging with the host community – a quality, by the way, that is notable in the programs offered by SIT, with their emphasis on directed self-study and their extensive use of in-country personnel. A welcome trend among study abroad professionals is a growing awareness of the ethics of study abroad, and a sense that it is not enough simply to set up our tent in a foreign country and proceed to use it as a classroom exclusively for our own purposes. Yet such practices are painfully frequent. To what extent are we obliged to our hosts for anything other than the exchange of cash? Mercenary approaches feed mercenary attitudes. Study abroad becomes a financial transaction. The presence of American students in a community becomes something to be tolerated for the money it brings. Recently the term “colonial student” has emerged to describe the student who spends time abroad isolated from the local population, fed better, privileged, appearing if not feeling superior. The British Raj as the model for American study abroad.... Such practices reinforce

prejudices on both sides, and the American student returns home confirmed in his or her preconceptions about the unpleasantness of native populations. Neither the current state of the dollar nor the delicacy of our consciences can long sustain such practices. We should strive to leave a community better than when we arrived, or at the very least we should do no harm. Reciprocity matters.

International Service-Learning

This brings me to the heart of the matter: service-learning. We say of service-learning that it consists of three parts: service, and learning, and a hyphen. The service-learning movement in this country is large and becoming larger. It is rooted in part in the desire to have young people learn the value of service: all across the country, in elementary and secondary schools as well as in higher education, community service, spurred by such organizations as Campus Compact, has become a highly visible aspect of education. Where this community service is connected to educational objectives and involves formal learning as well as service, we have service-learning.

Advocates of service-learning point out that hands-on service provides experience that can be used to inform the learning of theory. Service and learning are linked by reflection, the central element in this hyphenated process. Service-learning is valuable in promoting self-knowledge and the clarification of values, and it assists in the development of citizenship. It is also difficult to do successfully: handling the connection between experience and theory is not easy, and, while reflection is a powerful pedagogical tool, it requires a particular kind of engagement on the part of the instructor. Often, service-learning takes students out of their so-called comfort zone, crossing boundaries of class or race.

When service-learning is put into an international setting, it offers much more. There are many different kinds of international service-learning, some of them project-based and some of them process-based. Project-based programs may be of short duration and may involve building a school, inoculating children in a community, or some other project that has immediate impact and may bring about only limited contact with the community involved. Process-based programs are more likely to require extended service in a community, not necessarily working in a group, and particularly not in a primarily American group. IPSL's programs tend to be process-based. Coupled with homestays, run primarily by in-country personnel, and involving the deliberate dispersal of students among different agencies so that they cannot depend on Americans or fail to mix with the local community, they are demanding and deeply rewarding.

Such programs run counter to many of the assumptions that we make about conventional study abroad: IPSL works hard at safety, but the students are immersed in the community, not artificially protected from the local population; the courses that they take are not simply carbon copies of American courses, but generally taught by local professors. These professors tend to be knowledgeable about the United States and American youngsters, but they are also deeply knowledgeable about their own societies and well able to engage the students with hard questions and perhaps problematic self-revelations. In fact, in one sense such programs do serve home-institution goals: they involve close faculty supervision and require an integrated

curriculum. Even at IPSL, cell phones are a fact of life, but it's more difficult to spend one's day on the phone when one has a job to do in an agency.

Three years ago, we completed a three-year study of the students and programs in the International Partnership for Service-Learning. Our study, conducted with a Ford Foundation grant and published as *Service-Learning Across Cultures* in 2004, seems to have stimulated research in international service-learning. We discovered, and others have discovered, that students going through international service-learning undergo profound change in their thinking, and that the experience itself forces a re-evaluation of self and surroundings that can only be described as seismic. Such profound engagement may not be right for all, but it does tell us that international service-learning, crossing not only boundaries of class and race but also boundaries of culture and often language, is a pedagogy of enormous power. Surely there are elements of this experience that can be built into conventional study abroad, and surely the experience itself is worth replicating in other forms and other contexts.

Serving to Learn, or Learning to Serve?

But I am talking conventional educator-speak. I am talking about giving students a rich experience abroad when, given today's world, so many distractions and connections militate against immersion and the need for self-reliance. My suggestion, hardly surprisingly, is that we need at the very least to build into study abroad some opportunities to mix with local communities not as customers or ambassadors, but, to the maximum extent possible, as community members.

What I am *not* talking about, and should be talking about, is what the students actually do in the communities they serve. All too frequently, we hear in service-learning conferences about how difficult it is to get the community organizations to serve the needs of the students. What we less often hear about is how to mobilize young people around effective community service. Instead of thinking about service-learning as serving in order to learn, perhaps we should begin to think about it as learning in order to serve. A recent study by CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, notes that the current generation of college students has "a great deal of experience with volunteering" and that more young people in this generation "believe in their obligation to work together with others on social issues." Generation X, the report suggests, was self-centered; the Millennial Generation is ready to serve.

Fifty years ago in Britain, Alec Dickson, sensing a similar commitment to service among young people, founded Voluntary Service Overseas; a few years later, the Peace Corps, modeled on VSO, was founded. Later Alec Dickson was among those who became involved in the International Partnership for Service-Learning, because he saw in young Americans a willingness to engage in service. That spirit is alive again.

Can we turn study abroad around and see it, at least in part, as a great opportunity to mobilize young people for service on a worldwide scale? Not service to the American way of life, not service to some narrow notion of American citizenship, but service based on the simple notion that, as fellow human beings, we are called upon to help one another? If we are really bent on

sending a million Americans abroad, could we persuade more of them to go by giving them an opportunity to learn while volunteering? In no sense would we reduce their time in the classroom, or their time engaged in formal learning – but the learning would come *as a result of* meaningful service, not as an air-conditioned opportunity to use the rest of the world as a convenient classroom, or theme park, or bar. Perhaps we can work out ways of checking such American propensities at the border, as I tried to do as a student traveling the world using Esperanto. And perhaps we can reduce the heat of those anti-American diatribes not simply by giving America a different *face* but by practicing the art of being human. We live, when all is said and done, in a hyphenated world.... and a rich and varied world in which, thank God, there are more questions than answers.

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