

November/December 2006
Forum
Word Count: 2,341

Toward Globally Responsible Study Abroad

By Skye Stephenson

The “Year of Study Abroad” has presented us with an ideal opportunity to examine U.S.-based education abroad and its global implications with a critical eye. Beyond the burgeoning attention and expectations surrounding education abroad these days, how are we *really* faring as a field of endeavor that not only contributes to forming global citizens but also functions in a way that is globally responsible in word and deed? With ever more producers of all types engaging in “fair trade” practices, are we doing all that we can to ensure that education abroad is functioning in a “fair trade” manner? How can we, as international educators, actively shape the future direction of education abroad in ways that resonate with the kind of world we hope will emerge in the twenty-first century and beyond?

With this essay, I hope to begin a widespread dialog around these seminal questions and to posit some initial thoughts concerning what should be incorporated into the concept and practice of “Globally Responsible Study Abroad”.

Cross Currents in Education Abroad

To start this discussion, we need to take a critical look at the various types of cross currents buffeting education abroad these days. Three of the most salient are (1) mission and values (2) power and privilege and (3) inclusiveness of host country collaborators and consideration of host country impact.

Mission and Values

From the start of student exchanges in the United States through to the present day, there have been two different visions regarding the purpose and intended outcomes of education abroad. The first is the “global community and peace promotion” paradigm, sometimes referred to as the “idealist” perspective. Its underlying assumptions are that: student exchange=more intercultural contact=greater understanding of the other and cross-cultural deepening¹=greater policies of tolerance and less tendency to engage in ethnocentric-behavior toward other peoples=more peaceful world. Several of the key people involved in the early establishment of student exchange organizations were vocal proponents of this perspective, and an inordinate number were strongly influenced by Quaker principles and practices². Their legacy as well as the work of many other like-minded international educators in subsequent years still reverberates and shapes many organizations and programs today.

A different way of envisioning education abroad is the “growth and benefit” paradigm, in which the primary intention of education abroad is for personal benefit and, secondarily, national enhancement. This paradigm can be characterized as: student exchange=greater skills and knowledge=enhancement of professional possibilities=contributing to a more competent national workforce= helping the nation become stronger and maintain its competitive position in the world.

¹ Cross cultural deepening is defined as “the ability to encompass two or more differing cultural realities within oneself simultaneously; it is both cognitive and behavioral in nature” (see Stephenson, 2002, p. 87).

² The Experiment in International Living founder Donald Watts in the 1930s and the AFS founders in the 1940s were both deeply influenced by the Quaker principles and visions of peace and considered student exchanges one way to contribute to world peace by bringing people from different nations and cultures into contact.

These two different views of the meaning and purpose of education abroad are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, over the years they have interwoven both compatibly as well as with some tension in most of our ventures and activities. That said, in recent years there had been a generalized shift in emphasis toward the “growth and benefit” paradigm. Several scholars have noted this trend. For instance, Edwards, Hoffa and Kanach write that by the end of the 1980s, globalization impacted U.S. higher education in ways that focused upon “the lack of preparation among U.S. undergraduates for entering and competing successfully in an increasingly interdependent and ever-more globalized world economy and political order.”³ Recent education abroad documents and events corroborate the increasing emphasis upon education abroad as a way of enhancing U.S. competitiveness in a globalizing world, including the official reasons given for declaring 2006 the Year of Study Abroad as well as much of the Lincoln Commission report.

The education abroad field is both responding and shaping this shift as more focus is being given to assessing participant outcomes, proving the importance of education abroad to the participants’ future career path, and demonstrating how education abroad helps the United States create a more globally competent workforce. Significantly less discussion is being given to how education abroad may contribute to more peaceful and better world. All this is taking place against a backdrop of official U.S. policies that are exacerbating resentment and ill will towards the United States in many places around the world. Given this current configuration, it behooves us to raise the difficult question of whether these two different visions of education abroad—the idealist and the growth and benefit perspectives—are always mutually compatible. Is it possible that in some

³ Edwards, Hoffa and Kanach, p. 11.

contexts, promoting what is essentially U.S. professional training and what are officially deemed short-term U.S. “national interests” may actually “clash” with peace promotion and global community enhancement?⁴ If so, then how do we with ethical sensitivity and intellectual rigor promote dialogue around these (sometimes) conflicting paradigms in applied settings?

Privilege and Power

Education abroad as practiced in the United States is *sui generis* due to several factors, including the tremendous resources—financial and otherwise—that institutions and students in the United States have access to. This implicit undercurrent subtly permeates the nature of many of our activities abroad. At many sites, U.S. education abroad students have the opportunity to undertake activities and meet people that most host national students would never be able to avail themselves of, a reality that some local students and host culture providers feel most keenly.

The increasing perception of education abroad (as well as many other aspects of the higher educational experience) as a type of “commodity” that has been “purchased” and consequently, one deserves “quality service” as the “consumer” adds yet another dimension to the already privileged stance of education abroad in many parts of the world. The U.S. legal environment and fear of lawsuits exacerbates this tendency even more in some cases. As Jenkins and Skelly so cogently put it, “In addition to the idealist assumptions that inform education abroad, it has, in the main, become another service

⁴ Jenkins and Skelly explore these questions masterfully in their 2004 article in *International Educator* titled “Study Abroad Is Not Enough.”

industry that contributes in its own way to a consumerist orientation towards other cultures and societies.”⁵

In truth, culture shock is sometimes felt not just by program participants but also by host nationals who have to deal with them. A prominent Northern European international educator once told me that U.S. education abroad students typically needed 50 to 70 percent more time and attention than exchange students of any other nationality.

How can we, assuming we want to, encourage program participants to shift from a more “consumer focus” regarding their education abroad expectations and experience? And how should we as a field deal with the real privileges and, at times, sense of implicit entitlement embedded in some education abroad practices?

Inclusiveness of Host Country Collaborators and Impact: While education abroad could not exist without host country collaborators, from the stateside vantage point, these people often seem distantly vague; their voices are not frequently heard and their importance is not often overtly acknowledged. Speaking in general terms, U.S.-based education abroad to date has been strongly “self-centered,” focusing nearly exclusively upon the participants and the U.S.-based institutions that support and send them. Typically, the host culture members are viewed as a “pleasant backdrop” that enjoy receiving the students and find the monetary and other compensation adequate and appropriate for their efforts.

Few probe much more deeply; while many have examined how the education abroad experience may impact the participants, only a handful have considered how education abroad might impact the host culture. In some locales and situations, education abroad participants and programs can have a much broader impact than upon those who

⁵ Jenkins and Skelly, p. 9.

have consciously decided to collaborate, affecting host nationals whom may never have even heard of studying abroad. Sites where such impact has been corroborated include universities, host communities, and organizations of various types.

Without making any judgments regarding the implications of this impact, it is important to at least acknowledge that this impact does exist and can be notable in some cases. As more and more education abroad providers strive to set up programs overseas, especially in the developing world, it is imperative that we consider more systematically host culture impact as a factor in shaping program placement and implementation choices. To date, this area has received little systematic research and attention from the education abroad community.

Another slant on program impact has to do with knowledge generation and the validity accorded to diverse modes of learning and instruction. One of the most eye-opening aspects of an education abroad experience for many participants is realizing how different educational systems and pedagogical styles may be from what they were accustomed to in the United States. However, implicit in much of education abroad is the assumption that what has been learned abroad has to somehow match what the sending school offers. Might it not be more enriching for all to consider how to facilitate a reciprocal dialog and discussion between sending campuses and host country scholars and academics engaged with the program, rather than trying to fit the overseas learning experiences “more or less” into the sending schools’ curriculum?

Looking Toward “Globally Responsible Education Abroad”

How we respond to these cross currents blowing through education abroad these days will profoundly impact how education abroad evolves in the upcoming decade, and

beyond. We have now circled back to the issue raised at the start of this article, which is a call for discussion concerning what “Globally Responsible Study Abroad” should encompass. As a tentative first step, let me posit some general tenets for consideration.

1. Expand the Education Abroad Community

“Globally Responsible Education Abroad” needs to consciously incorporate more host nationals into the international education fold. The collective “we” of education abroad should encompass all those who collaborate with education abroad. To accomplish this, U.S.-based international education professional organizations and structures should strive for greater inclusion in their membership base as well as in their research agendas.

Additionally, the current dialog around standards needs to incorporate standards that deal not only with what programs should provide to the participants but also how education abroad programs should function *en sitio*. Host country standards should include, at a minimum, the stipulation that permanent education abroad programs overseas need to be legally compliant. They should also incorporate consideration of education abroad program impact in regards to both program setup and delivery.

2. Consider “Fair Trade” Policies Regarding Education Abroad Funds

“Globally responsible education abroad” needs to also encompass the financial implications of education abroad programming. Education abroad programs usually are moneymaking ventures for the program providers, whatever other intentions might also be involved. In fact, education abroad is a business that is getting larger, more lucrative and more competitive all the time. What do these financial realities imply for all of us engaged in education abroad, both stateside and at program locales scattered around the world? If producers of products such as coffee and cocoa are flaunting their ethical

practices of reinvesting a portion of their profits in host country projects, should we consider similar policies in education abroad?

Whatever the overall position of the education abroad community in the United States will be around this controversial issue in the upcoming period, it is quite likely that there will be an increasing number of requests for such “reinvestment” and/or “reciprocity” from host country collaborators as they become more experienced and knowledgeable in dealing with U.S. education abroad program providers, and as demand expands for education abroad opportunities around the world.

3. Reinforce Education Abroad Experience Outcomes

“Globally Responsible Education Abroad” should push all of us to acknowledge in word and deed our mutual responsibilities and privileges to each other as members of a large network that includes education abroad providers, sending colleges and universities, in-country collaborators as well as the program participants themselves. Education abroad students need to be made more aware of the real privilege their experience implies, and pushed to consider the responsibilities inherent in such privilege. This might include yet another slant on why culturally appropriate behavior is so critical when engaging in education abroad as well as more specific activities such as encouraging education abroad students to not only engage in community welfare projects and service learning while abroad, but to also do so in their local communities upon returning back to the United States. In fact, several sponsoring nonprofit organizations abroad have now made student commitment to working in the United States in a similar capacity upon their return a hallmark to accepting them in country.

Parting Thoughts

These rather tentative guidelines need to be taken up and further developed by committed individuals based both “in the field” and the United States, bringing together voices and perspectives from “both sides” of the education abroad program cycle. Articulating and implementing a conscious practice of “globally responsible education abroad” stands to benefit all of us, whatever our connection to education abroad may be. As more people become involved in education abroad and demands for programs and internships continue to expand, it behooves us as committed global citizens to ensure that we are carrying out our work in a way that is responsible to all parties involved. The implications of our choices extend beyond our own circle of education abroad participants and contributors, for the decisions we make will play a role in shaping the future development of international education and, in a broader sense, the global community.

SKYE STEPHENSON is

Notes

Bibliography

Jenkins, Karen and James Skelly. 2004. "Education Abroad Is Not Enough," *International Educator* 8, 1:7–12.

Hovey, Rebecca. 2005. "Study Abroad, Global Knowledge and the Epistemic Communities of Higher Education." Paper presented at the annual International Studies Association conference, Honolulu, Hawaii.

Stephenson, Skye. 1999. "Study Abroad as a Transformational Experience and Its Effect upon Study Abroad Students and Host Nationals in Santiago, Chile." *Frontiers* (fall 1999), pp. 1–38.

Comment: Need volume number to make this bibliographic citation correct.

———2002. "Beyond the Lapiths and the Centaurs: Cross-cultural Deepening through Study Abroad," in Walter Grunzweig and Nana Rinehart (eds). *Rockin in Red Square: Critical Approaches to International Education in the Age of Cyberculture* London and Munster, Lit Verlag.

———2006. "International Educational Flows (IEFs) between the United States and Cuba (1959–2005): Policy Winds and Exchange Flows." *Journal of Cuban Studies* (spring 2006).

Comment: Again, need volume number make this correct.