Educational Travel and Global Learning

To “liberate” students from the constraints of ignorance and myopia has long been heralded as the aim of a truly liberal education (Roth, 2015). Educational travel offers the opportunity to experience familiar things within an unfamiliar context. The very act of moving from one place to another helps create a space where we can bump up against strangeness and reexamine some of the settled assumptions we hold regarding the world – and ourselves. The world becomes the living classroom – a place to watch and wonder, to enter into experiences and perspectives of others, to communicate across differences, and to use knowledge on behalf of the common good.

Although global learning is most often associated with college-level study abroad programs, there are many forms of educational opportunities that take us away from our usual habitat in order to explore the realities of a wider world and our responses to it. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has defined global learning as

. . . a critical analysis of and an engagement with complex, interdependent global systems and legacies (such as natural, physical, social, cultural, economic, and political) and their implications for people’s lives and the earth’s sustainability. Through global learning, students should (1) become informed, open-minded, and responsible people who are attentive to diversity across the spectrum of differences, (2) seek to understand how their actions affect both local and global communities, and (3) address the world’s most pressing and enduring issues collaboratively and equitably. (AAC&U, 2014).

Intellectual and ethical development rarely happens by merely learning about other peoples and places, through either reading the pages of a book, listening to a lecture, or the viewing of a film or video. It seems to take up-close-and-personal encounters with people of other social worlds to instruct us about our common humanity and our deepest differences, all the while inducing us to live beyond our narrow identities and allegiances. When we do something with others – live with them, world or study alongside them – we become something together. We construct a self that can bridge the chasms that divide us and contribute something of enduring value to others.

Although the potential for acquiring a truly global education has never been greater, actually achieving it requires more than simply “being there.” Much depends on whether our field experiences are structured in ways that promote meaningful intellectual and intercultural learning. Without the requisite understandings and skills to learn with and from people in our field setting, we will tend to accumulate novel experiences but without stepping much outside our comfort zones – and when this “cocooning” occurs, we cannot expect much deep learning to take place.

However, global learning in the context of Creighton University’s Jesuit values must not only be in the world but also for it. Educational travel should leave the world a saner, stronger, and more sustainable place. The ultimate goal of our global learning is the healing of a broken world.

How best, then, can we balance our educational and self-improvement needs with the developmental needs of destination communities? Without a doubt, short-term study and service abroad carries deep personal satisfactions. But it also runs the risk of unleashing well-meaning and untrained individuals on unsuspecting communities.
Healing actions can grow only from a humble awareness of being deeply connected with and responsible to the rest of the human and non-human universe. Intellectual learning alone rarely fosters this type of solidarity. It seems to require direct, embodied contact that allows us to hear the cries of a distressed creation, to find ways to create local friendships, and to work, side by side, to provide local, modest, but intensely human lifelines. Ultimately, that is why we cross the boundaries of nation, culture, language, religion, and social class – to create “bridging capital” (Putnam, 2000) – acts of friendship and solidarity rooted in a common reverence for human dignity, local knowledge, and the moral good. Such acts express the firm hope that our share humanity, beyond our real differences, provides the necessary foundation for finding common solutions to the threats facing the world today.

How might our global learning be shaped to promote the common good? Much depends on why and how we leave, and also how we return. That is what makes pre-departure training and post-sojourn analysis so important – done well, both processes help us to realize the transformative potential of our journeys. Pre-field preparations should move us beyond discussion of packing lists and assorted “do’s and don’ts” to consider the ultimate purposes and practical learning strategies needed for us to enter deeply into our host culture. The post-sojourn process should help us to integrate the experiences and insights from the field into our ongoing academic and personal lives.

Global learning recognizes that in a globalized world, geographic location is far less important than economic and political relationships, along with real-life conditions. Thus, the “Developing World” can just as easily include parts of Omaha, Chicago or Los Angeles, as it does Santiago de los Caballeros, Karachi or rural Vietnam. Regardless of destination, unless we try to understand local economic inequality, life expectancy, nutrition, gender inequality, education, technology, environment, urban shelter, and many other factors, all we do is “roam a world of difference in a cocoon of sameness” (Slimbach, 2012, p. 60). Outside of our cocoon are the “others” – those poor others who cross the boundaries of nations as economic or environmental refugees, an entire global social class fundamentally and permanently disconnected from a decent existence. Their poverty coexists with unprecedented affluence in modernizing megacities the world over. The divide is not primarily geographic – between North and South, for example. It has to do with basic political and economic relationships that split the “winners” from the “losers” within every place. Global learning is about bridging this divide.

Educational travel has a limited, though profoundly important, contribution to make to people’s own development. As study-abroad students, service-learners, or other agents of humanitarian care we have the rare opportunity to support and strengthen a community-driven process of change. But any participatory role must emerge out of a dynamic learning process. It must be framed by an empathetic grasp of how people in a given setting think – how they make sense of their lives in relation to the complex forces and choices that face them. And it must be rooted in a basic trust in the ability of people, no matter how disadvantaged, to improve their lives. Only then are we in a position to discover how our skills and knowledge might be utilized in side-by-side solidarity with our community hosts.

References


