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International Education and Higher Education: A Complex Affair

Introduction

I will open these thoughts with a brief indication of the research methodology that is embedded within. There are really two sources:

a) The first is drawn from a long and noble European tradition that includes, over hundreds of years, such luminaries as Hobbes, Kant, John Stuart Mill, and Rousseau: a tradition that has certainly spread to the halls of academia in this great country. The basic methodology is to start with a significant set of prejudices and to seek evidence that sustains and supports those unreasoned assumptions while, simultaneously, ignoring or suppressing contradictory evidence.

b) The other source is the comedian and visionary, Steven Wright, who said "to copy one person is plagiarism; to copy two is research."

Those are the principles that have guided me throughout my career and, indeed, inform my remarks today.

My other sources are the Book of Job and the lamentations of Jeremiah but I am seeking professional help for that.

A Complex Affair?

Henry James said that to be an American is a complex fate and one aspect of that complexity is an uneasy, ambiguous relationship with Europe and, consequently, with the world elsewhere: what we call "abroad". That thought resonates within discussions of international education in all of its manifestations, as I hope to indicate later. International education is itself a loosely defined term that has many dimensions and numerous significations. Broadly, these fall into two categories: the first relates to what the Europeans tend to call internationalisation at home (which includes matters of curriculum); and the second to mobility (virtual or real, of faculty, students and administrators). I want to focus predominantly on questions of mobility but will offer a few thoughts on internationalisation at home and curriculum.

a) Internationalisation at home/ curriculum

This is not a simple or single process. Among other things, it is pertinent to ask to what degree international perspectives are embedded in curriculum. For example, does the course on the history of the Vietnam War integrate Vietnamese perspectives? Do we recognise that in another perspective the course might be called, "The War of Franco-American Aggression"?

Further, what value (and values) do international students bring to the home campus? How are those values maximised? Another dimension might relate to international faculty on campus: to

what degree are they actively recruited? What do you do with them when you have them? Are they encouraged to use their connections overseas to develop, for example, joint research, faculty exchange and student mobility? It is not sufficient for foreign faculty simply to be there. There has to be a function and purpose.

There are, also, stakeholders and constituencies outside of the institution who have significant engagement: trustees, local politicians, religious leaders, local business people and others could be enlisted in international endeavours as advisors and, in time, supporters. That might, nevertheless, expose a paradoxical imperative that hovers around these issues: to what degree does the creation of an international agenda, conflict with the objective of rooting the institution in the community? Those of us on this field tend to think of community as something that is not defined by, or constrained by, geography. We are closer to Newman's idea of a community of scholars that, in our case, transcends location. My community does not live in my neighbourhood but in many parts of the world including, I am pleased to say, SUNY Oswego. In contrast, community may also be defined by geography and an entirely laudable objective of a university might be to serve the neighbours, to become a local asset in several ways: employer, consultant, community centre etc etc. Glib assertions about the global and the local (you hear the hideous term glocal) should not obscure the fact that there is a potential conflict of interest between a local and a global agenda. This may well be reconcilable but it will not be reconciled by recourse to cliché.

Another measure of internationalisation might be the degree to which international activity is recognised as a significant factor in tenure track and promotion issues. Contributions to international activity are rarely a formally recognised factor in tenure review. In some contexts, in fact, younger tenure-track faculty are discouraged from participation because it is argued that this kind of engagement might damage their tenure possibilities. If the rules of tenure do not explicitly reward and recognise international contribution there is, clearly, a disconnect between rhetoric and practice.

b) Mobility

Our agenda today is, however, more obviously focused on undergraduate mobility (study abroad) and specifically (I hope) on joint projects and partnerships between SUNY Oswego and CAPA International Education.

Education abroad raises complex issues that are frequently obscured by our justified enthusiasm for the project. We are committed to the "how" issues (the enabling and administration of effective study abroad) but we rarely have time for grown up conversations about "why" (the theoretical basis of our endeavours). As a consequence we have a number of unexamined assumptions and orthodoxies that I will attempt to unpack in the following remarks.

Before I move in that direction, let me conclude my thoughts on internationalisation with an observation from a stranger in a strange land. Almost no strategic plan produced by any US university over the last ten years has failed to place internationalisation (whatever that might mean) at the core of institutional development. That said, few strategic plans have matched the rhetoric with action (I know that SUNY Oswego is one of the righteous exceptions). A strategic commitment to the international does not ensure that anything concrete occurs. The affair between international education and US higher education is a complicated and complex one, more often leading to inexpert fumbling rather than satisfactory consummation. It is also riddled with paradoxes and conflicting imperatives: a local mission and an international aspiration; a sense of "abroad" as a repository of culture and values that are somehow absent in America.

With those thoughts blessedly behind me, let me talk about what I'm supposed to be talking about. I will look now at some of the matters, issues and concerns that make education abroad a more complex area of investigation than might ostensibly be the cas**e.**

Education abroad and a few conundrums

I would like to start with a few things that bother me. I will begin with a brief look at an iconic figure and then wander around some other illusions and delusions.

a) Joe McCarthy

Let me start, of course, with Senator Joseph McCarthy (Witch Finder General and conspiracy theorist par excellence), and the idea of culture. This field limped towards maturity in the 1950s at precisely the point that it became suspect and foolhardy to say too much about internationalism, cosmopolitanism, or the politics of trans-national relations (unless you were against all of them). In the USA in the 1950s, on university campuses (and elsewhere) it was, simply, a risky business. It became easier to talk about something else, something safer and more anodyne. Those historical constraints and enforced restraints at the root of education abroad have led towards conversations that focus on culture rather than the thornier issues of politics: questions of religious difference, inequality, social injustice, nationalism, tribalism, historical conflict are muted in the education abroad because culture is a less challenging matter. What started as a defensive strategy evolved into a mode of discourse that became orthodoxy, the source of many conference presentations, and the basis of a number of weighty tomes, and not a few PhDs. It is also a way of avoiding a more serious discussion. This is reminiscent of the kind of advice you would find in a nineteenth century guide to etiquette where it might suggest that it is impolite to discuss politics or religion while partaking of crumpets.

Our analyses are largely rooted in an imprecise and befuddled notion of culture expressed in various unconvincing collocations: cross-cultural this, and inter-cultural that, which appear to offer comprehensive mechanisms, grand narratives for understanding similarities and differences. But, what are we not talking about? Why are we not talking about those things? In programmes in the developing world are learning outcomes based on cultural difference the most important thing to understand about, say, South Africa or Ghana? What of the North-South

divide? Where do students learn of the inequitable distribution of global resources? Why, for example, did Tony Blair say that Africa was a scar on the conscience of the world? Can we understand the significance of Apartheid through cultural analysis? These are not questions that can be answered through the lens of cultural discourse. The degree to which the language of education abroad is rooted, myopically, in questions of "culture" in its many collocations has not enhanced the credibility of our endeavours.

b) The problem of tolerance

The notion of tolerance to, or acceptance of, cultural diversity is also problematic. Tolerance or acceptance is not a value that we should promote without serious qualification. The line between tolerance and intolerance is not definitive. Do we want students to tolerate bullfighting as a factor in Spanish culture for example? That is not a simple ethical question and there are credible viewpoints that might argue for or against the proposition. It becomes much simpler if we consider torture, abuse of women, bribery, public execution, female circumcision, "honour" killing, slavery (all practices that are, or have been, embedded in some national cultures). Do we want students to learn to be tolerant of all cultural diversity? Does a debate focused on culture distort the politics and morality of experience?

Education in general should aspire to teach students not to tolerate, but to discriminate intelligently between things: the smart and the stupid, the crass and the clever, the moral, amoral and immoral, the real and the unreal. In education abroad we forefront the notion of tolerance when it would be better to consider how students may be empowered to make their own

intelligent and informed acts of discrimination. This is another consequence of the culture syndrome.

c) The Liberal agenda

The source of the problematic preoccupation with tolerance is, probably, the simple fact that education abroad has a remorselessly liberal ideology. I am, incidentally, not challenging that ideology on the basis of personal conviction. Frankly, I believe that when dumb people say the same things over and over again, those things gain a kind of spurious credibility and evolve, in time, into Conservative Party policy. I also believe that when intelligent people say the same things over and over again, those things gain a kind of spurious credibility and evolve, in time, into international educational orthodoxies.

A liberal consensus constructs a narrow and constricting base from which to develop a more inclusive approach to education abroad. There are embedded values (cultural tolerance for example) that exclude significant communities of potential participants (Republicans study abroad too) and, thus, undermine a notional commitment to diversity.

Our preoccupation with under-representation is, for example, entirely selective. We are concerned about the under-representation of those communities of whom we approve. We assume (often wrongly) that there exists a community of shared purpose and common values. This is an illusion. There are under-represented groups who have a profoundly conservative view of the world in which, for example, homosexuality is an anathema; interaction with other

communities may be seen not only as an opportunity but as a potential threat. When have you heard anyone in education abroad expressing concern that the Christian Right is under-represented? They are, and you haven't. That is because they do not belong to the community of education abroad shaped by liberal ideologies that are implicit, embedded, and usually unacknowledged.

It may be that there are groups that we cannot speak to in a meaningful way (the far Christian Right is probably be one of them). That said, if we want to be inclusive we need to be responsive to the very large population of US citizens who do not assume that liberal values best serve the truth or best serve the young. That population may be defined by (among other things) geography, ethnicity or religion (discussion of the bars in Berlin is unlikely to be well received in a Muslim home; tolerance of sexual diversity might not resonate well in churches and communities across this country). These are, nevertheless, under-represented populations in education abroad and they are not the subject of much (any?) concern.

d) The rhetoric of transformation

I have touched upon the problem of rhetorical distortion and I want now to offer a snapshot of rhetorical inflation around the notion of transformation. Any experience has the potential to be transformative: love, backache, wealth, poverty, the ingestion of dangerous drugs, and, above all, death. Transformation is usually a dramatic event or quasi-mystical process or a moment of epiphany and conversion: probably, the territory of priests, prophets and madmen.

Our objectives should not be framed in terms of transforming the lives of students though lives may be transformed: a consequence not an objective. There is considerable difference in this context between the formative which seems to me to be a realistic educational objective that can be measured, and the transformative, which is dependent on epiphany and acts of revelation.

By way of illustration, the phrase "study abroad changed my life" is problematic not for what it says about an individual but for what it implies. The statement is made by sincere people for whom it may well be demonstrably true. It reminds us of the real power of what we do. What we seek to demonstrate to our participants is that what they think may not be the only thing worth thinking; that values are not universal; that there is a world elsewhere, and that crossing borders is both an act of geographical mobility and an act of empathy between the self and the other. These lessons are far too important to dilute through inflated rhetoric.

As we deconstruct the statement, there are problematic implications. Firstly, the individual in the statement is the passive recipient of the envisaged life-changing process (Compare "study abroad changed my life" with "I changed my life by studying abroad."). Abroad is an undifferentiated commodity to be consumed. Students going to another country for education have not bought a product guaranteed to meet their needs, nor have they bought an experience that will inevitably change their lives. Studying abroad is not a ride in Disneyland where, in return for buying an admission ticket, participants are guaranteed a thrill. Instead, participants have gained access to an opportunity.

The statement creates a mythical, single, undifferentiated space called “abroad”, as if “abroad” were one transforming location (where is it?) wherein the participant will gain insight simply and merely through proximity -- which as we all know does not guarantee intimacy. On a literal level, mere proximity will not ensure change of any kind. To gain anything from any form of study the participant needs to be an active researcher not a vessel into which experience is poured. In natural sciences mixing A with B in a test tube will almost certainly create a C. That is not the case in our field. As we are well aware, you can take participant A to location B without any perceptible C emerging.

Further, by mythologizing the transformative power of this place “abroad”, there is an implicit denigration of the home learning environment. In short, it is disrespectful of home society which does not, by implication, have the same power to alter life experience. In that respect, it resonates with a long tradition in American culture based on the denigration of home by comparison with the other place, usually Europe. This goes back to Washington Irving, runs through Mark Twain and Henry James, and is persistent. The implication is that “abroad” has the transformative power that is somehow missing at home. It, in any case, is too much to expect a location (of itself) to be transformative. Wherever you go, you take yourself with you. It is clearly possible to change your life in Paris, Timbuktu, San Francisco, or even Oswego, New York. In short, we are burdening ourselves with definitions that create grossly inflated expectations.

The rhetoric creates expectations that we cannot in faith achieve or guarantee. What of the student whose life is not changed but who improves their Mandarin? Is that a failure? As a

personal statement “study abroad changed my life” is usually heartfelt and a welcome affirmation. As a statement of professional intent it is a burden that can only serve to grossly inflate expectations beyond reason.

The concept of the ‘global citizen’ is another related example. The idea is obviously an Oxymoron: we are citizens of a country and we are not citizens of the globe: a fractured and divided place. If we tell students that what we do is educate them to be global citizens we are embedding failure in the experience. Rather, we should be more realistic and say that the object is to teach students something about another culture so they can be better citizens of their own.

The status of a “global citizen” is an absolute condition (you either are or are not); in contrast, (despite all the historical associations) the notion of cosmopolitanism is progressive and leads more readily towards specificity, aspiration, and a process of acquisition from less to more. We would have more credibility if we reclaimed cosmopolitanism both as a subject to be taught (relates perfectly to study abroad) and as a set of values to which we might aspire.

The notion of cosmopolitanism is, however, made complex by history. For both Hitler and Stalin, being cosmopolitan was a capital offence, and implied having an allegiance beyond the nation that challenged and subverted extreme nationalist ideals. The collocation of rootless and cosmopolitan was used, in particular, to characterise the Jews (oddly enough the one thing that Stalin and McCarthy agreed upon in the 1950s). [1] If these historical associations with cosmopolitanism are too intrusive, notions of international awareness or consciousness work as effectively. The key distinction is that, whatever language we employ, it should signify the

possibility of being qualified by “more” or “less.” It is, thus, subject to progressive acquisition i.e. it can be taught and learned: not some envisaged state of grace. Imagining a blessed elevation to the status of global citizen is a matter of ideological or religious faith (the business of the “priests” rather than the “professors”). It does us a significant disservice to speak in the language of the prophets unless the goal is, indeed, to become a prophet. For most of us our goals are, advisably, more limited; as educators we aim to move students from relative ignorance towards relative understanding.

The language of transformation shifts the concerns of education abroad professionals in unfortunate directions. This is not at all to deny that lives are changed in education abroad. All experiences may have the capacity to become transformative. The point is that transformation should not be a core expectation in education abroad: inflationary rhetoric sets up expectations that distort real potential for learning and growth.

e) What is experiential education?

Finally, a swift word about experiential education because of the centrality of the notion in study abroad and the fact that very little attention is paid to what it actually means. Experiential education recognises that there is value in learning outside of the classroom: that principle is embedded in the core philosophy of education abroad at the most basic level which implies, simply, that student learning is enhanced outside of the national classroom walls through analysis and exploration of, and engagement with, a world elsewhere.

One problem, however, is that *all experience* (good, bad, damaging, enlivening, fatal or otherwise) is to some degree educational. That is, it teaches some kind of a lesson. (Dogs learn by experience too). If all experience is in one way or another educational, the challenge is to create experiences that translate into, and interrelate with, credible academic objectives. In essence, experience alone is not enough: proximity to culture does not make one culturally aware. Experience needs to be integrated into formal learning intentionally and systematically so that there are clear ways in which academic study is enhanced (the assumption behind CAPA's "My Education" programme). Otherwise, the line between tourism abroad and education abroad (both experiences after all) is blurred.

In short we need to get back to a coherent description of the benefit of experiential education abroad so that we can then move from good theory to enhanced practice.. The crucial notion is that experiential education makes *connections* between academic content and experience. Such connections are a key component, implicitly or explicitly, in education abroad and are frequently the distinguishing factor between education on campus and education overseas. They enact the Chinese proverb: "To know and not to do is to not yet know," or, more precisely, John Dewey's dictum (1938) that "there is an intimate and necessary relation between the process of actual experience and education."

It is, for example, perfectly possible to read about and understand the impact of immigration on a national culture but education abroad connects that information with the physical manifestations of that process.

The crucial concept is that of connection. Connection is at the core of our academic agenda expressed in our focus on the analysis and exploration of global cities, made concrete and manifest in our My Education provision.

Conclusion

I have tried to talk about some of the things that bother me and some of the things that have helped shape CAPA's agenda. We have tried to avoid empty rhetoric and crass generalisation and create a strong ethical, intellectual, and theoretical basis for what we aspire to achieve. In this, I believe, we share a common purpose with our colleagues at SUNY Oswego.

In conclusion at CAPA we believe these things:

We need grown up education abroad: an endeavour that is not based on inflated rhetoric or incoherent notions of culture; that is not rooted in smug self congratulation and complacency; that is innovative and serious; that creates genuine partnership with US higher education not a trivial frippery at the periphery;

We need international education in which practice aligns with rhetoric.

This is not a simple matter. It signals that this is, after all, a complex affair. Albert Einstein`s exhortation seems entirely appropriate: "We should make it as simple as possible but no simpler."

That is, in short, our agenda.

[1] This topic was incidentally part of the discussions that took place in the second of a series of seminars convened by CAPA International Education. CAPA will publish those proceedings and related material in May 2013 as part of the Occasional Papers series.