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The Ideological Landscape of Education Abroad

Introduction:

When intelligent people say the same things repeatedly and for long enough, those statements gain a spurious legitimacy and become transformed into unexamined orthodoxies.

The question of culture

The Nazi dramatist Hanns Johst in “Schlageter” has a character declaim that “whenever I hear of culture I release the safety catch of my Browning”. It is widely believed that this is the source of Herman Goring’s assertion that “When I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun.” My reactions are comparatively muted but nevertheless I do have a sense of disquiet about the degree to which the discourse of education abroad is rooted, myopically, in questions of “culture” in its many collocations (inter-cultural communication, cross-cultural stuff etc.)

The comprehensive and consuming focus on (often imprecise) notions of culture raises some obvious questions: What are we not talking about? Why are we not talking about those things? Why are questions of politics, inequality, social injustice, history so muted in education abroad?. There may be a plethora of reasons but at least one explanation may be rooted in the history of education abroad in the twentieth century.

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. The historical roots of education abroad have led towards foci on culture rather than politics: questions of religious difference, inequality, social injustice, nationalism, tribalism, historical conflict are muted in the education abroad discourse because culture is a less challenging matter. It is certainly easier and less disturbing to talk about culture rather than questions of the politics of global injustice: but, are the most convincing analyses to be found in questions of cultural difference rather than in the realities of power?

Such intellectual inertia does no service either to the field of education abroad or to the students who participate in programmes that implicitly fail to offer analyses beyond the anodyne. Implicit in the prevailing set of emphases is the idea that somehow or other culture offers a grand narrative or global explanation of difference. It constructs culture as some kind of barrier to communication: a set of constraints that students need to be taught to overcome because culture, whatever it is, defines our differences..

This ignores some important factors:

a) Depending on what view you take of culture it may be seen as a cohesive rather than a divisive factor. It can be argued, for example, that youth culture as expressed in pop music, by way of illustration, creates a level of common communication greater than any disconnects resulting from national difference. The same might be said of trans-national communities created by shared faith, language, class, sexual preference etc. etc.

b) Educational objectives based around notions of culture may also distort and constrain credible learning outcomes. In programmes in the developing world, for example, are learning outcomes based on cultural difference the most important thing to understand about, say, South Africa or Ghana? What of geo-political consequences of the North-South divide? Where do students learn of the inequitable distribution of global resources? 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 our academic credibility.

The problem of tolerance

The notion of tolerance to, or acceptance of, cultural diversity is also problematic. Tolerance or acceptance of cultural difference 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 but, arguably, it becomes much easier if we consider torture, abuse of women, bribery, public execution, female circumcision, the amputation of limbs for criminal acts, the imprisonment and execution of homosexuals, honor killing, slavery (all practices that are, or have been, embedded in some national cultures). Do we want students to learn to be tolerant of that cultural diversity? Do we want to encourage students to become apologists for cruelty and inhumanity? That is more than immoral; it is also stupid – it assumes, for example, that national practices are static cultural realities rather than temporary aberrations.

In my view, education in general should aspire to teach students not to tolerate, but to discriminate between things: the smart and the stupid, the crass and the clever, the moral, amoral and immoral, the real and the unreal, the humane and the inhumane. 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 should lead us to interrogate the limits of our own tolerance and to explore the boundaries of our concerns with regard to questions of diversity and under-representation. We are all aware that education abroad does not reflect the diversity of the US classroom. We are all earnestly engaged with under-representation and we share an admirable commitment to the value of diversity. Does this commitment fully embrace regional, religious, or political divergence? Republicans study abroad too and the Christian Right may well be an under-represented group. This leads me to towards my final topic: the liberal agenda

The Liberal agenda

One source of the problematic preoccupation with tolerance is, probably, the simple fact that education abroad has an embedded liberal ideology. I am not challenging that ideology on the basis of political conviction (personally my politics are remorselessly and thoughtlessly left wing, driven by profound, primitive, visceral class prejudice), but on the grounds that a liberal consensus constructs a narrow and constricting base from which to develop a more inclusive approach. There are embedded values (cultural tolerance for example) that exclude significant communities of potential participants and, thus, undermine a notional commitment to diversity. If we committed to giving students the tools with which to think rather than teaching them what to think we might create a more diverse student body in a more inclusive environment.

Our concerns with under-representation are 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 or Fundamentalist Baptism 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 may 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 (representations of the bars in Berlin in promotional literature are 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, or any, concern.

Finally, this is, I guess, a kind of Jeremiah approach to education abroad :we howl at the moon and assert with the authors of the Old Testament that “There shall be lamentation generally upon all the housetops of Moab.”