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Reimagining the International Experience: providers, authenticity, relevance and outcomes

Introduction:

Practitioners in the field of study abroad frequently seek "authentic experience" for their students, work with "providers" to create programmes that are relevant to their universities in the USA, and carefully measure the perceived learning outcomes. These are valid and necessary processes that are, nevertheless, are worth interrogating so as to reveal implicit and embedded assumptions that do not always enhance the coherence of these endeavours. In this discussion I will consider what is meant by the term "provider"; examine notions of authenticity and relevance; and offer some perspectives on ways in which we might reconstruct learning objectives to achieve greater measurable specificity.

What is a provider?

The term is frequently used to designate all non-university organisations that serve education abroad but it is, in many respects, unhelpful and misleading in so far as it creates a single institutional category for quite diverse organisations. There is a significant distinction between a provider and an international educational organisation: the distinction is one of form, function and objective.

A provider is an organisation that acts as a broker between the US university and overseas institutions. In other words, the provider selects a portfolio of programmes and courses and acts as an intermediary, usually adding value through logistical support, technical enhancements (payment in dollars and ease of credit transfer, for example), and student services. There is no negative implication in this description nor am I suggesting that these services are less valuable than other mechanisms that create education abroad opportunities. A provider is, in this context, not directly responsible for educational provision to the participants; is not responsible for delivery or, ultimately, for developing awareness or skills in the participants. Through the process of judicious selection they delegate teaching and learning to appropriate overseas

institutions. Their educational responsibility is limited to, and defined by, the degree of skill they show in the process of selection. Thus, for example, the University of Northern New Jersey sends students through provider X to the University of Grimsby in the UK. In short, this is a tri-lateral mechanism between US university, provider and overseas university. A provider is, in this respect, an agent for the host university.

That simply does not describe the major activity of our organisation or others like us. The core of what we do is to teach students courses that we have devised and that have been approved by US institutions and/or other external agencies. Among others we might cite DIS or the global campuses of CEA as operating analogous models. We may give students access to other university courses but that is not the major part of our educational strategy. Our primary activity is teaching students and, ancillary to that, we house them and look after them. That is precisely what an overseas university or college does. This is in effect a bi-lateral arrangement between the US institution and ourselves. We are directly responsible for the learning that does or does not occur. We have not delegated this to any other educational institution. As a side note others have grappled with the nomenclature for institutions operating in this manner and "international educational organisation" is the term that has some semi-official recognition by NAFSA and Forum.

What is authenticity?

This is a problematic notion. If we talk of authentic experience we also need to have some idea of what we mean by inauthentic experience. I am unable to imagine what an inauthentic experience really is. How can experience be inauthentic? It may be that some students experience their environment through a tourist gaze or in a very limited way but that is a definition of a lost opportunity, a failure of education, not inauthenticity. It is authentically unsatisfactory.

The notion of authenticity really derives from a set of assumption about what constitutes, for example, the "real" Spain or Italy or wherever. Notions of reality are, in this context, usually idealised images drawn from stereotypical projections: Jerusalems of the imagination. Lamentations about the loss of the real England, for example, are usually rooted in some version of a dreamed landscape shaped by Ealing comedies, Agatha Christie's Miss Marples, and countless other fantasises of bucolic, pastoral community. The notion of the real Spain is frequently filtered through imperfect recollections of Hemingway's version of heroic Iberian landscapes; but are the beaches of Benidorm really less authentic, less real, than the sawdust bars of Pamplona? What would an unreal Spain look like? Where is it? In short, notions of authenticity are usually expressions of conservative nostalgia for lost worlds that exist, if at all, in myths of nation and identity.

There is nevertheless a spectrum of experience that has, I think, nothing much to do with authenticity but more to do with educational purpose and utility. The pursuit of authenticity is an unlovely combination of futility and delusion. What matters is engagement through experience. A problem is that all experience is to some degree educational (death may be an exception depending on your religious belief). That is, experience teaches some kind of a lesson (dogs are good at this). The challenge is to create experiences that translate into, and interrelate with, credible academic objectives which we call "experiential education". Experience is about engagement with environments (human and/or concrete) beyond us: proximity is not enough: proximity to culture does not make one culturally aware.

The key factor is to create an intentional learning environment that demonstrates the relevance of the activity and creates meaningful, structured engagement. There are many possible mechanisms to try to achieve this objective. CAPA's MyEducation provision is just one example: a selection of events arranged around themes that give students opportunities to engage with the host society in an intentional and strategic manner. The themes are "intellectual maps": imaginative constructs, ways of structuring experience, pathways through the global cities in which we are located. The intent is to create a transaction between formal and informal learning and to make the division between different modes of learning porous. The thematic organization of events creates structure and meaning around the activities, and permits interaction and integration between the academic program and experiential opportunities.

The meaningful distinction is not between the authentic and inauthentic but between the educationally valid and the superficial. We might characterise this as the difference between seeing and observing, hearing and listening. Seeing and hearing are (for most of us) involuntary; observing and listening are skills that need to be taught and learnt. The objective is to give students the skills that empower them to make connections between theory and practice, creating a circle of dynamic and interactive learning: exploration leads to analysis and back to further exploration, and to further analysis: a cumulative and measurable process of enrichment.

Relevance to home campus programmes

The idea of relevance is not a simple one. A complication over recent years has been the notion of curriculum integration. The broad idea that curriculum overseas should align with curriculum in the USA has a seductive appeal and, in practice, the outcome has been largely positive. By

implication, that which is taught abroad should have parity of esteem with courses taught on the home campus and, thus, academic credibility. Consequently, credits earned can be transferred unproblematically into a student's degree pathway. That is a pre-requisite for credible and relevant education abroad.

The problem is that curriculum integration can also be interpreted in a manner that leads to some unintended consequences. A rigid or crude view may lead to the export of US educational standards and content in a way that undermines the exceptional nature of courses taught overseas. If the selection of approved courses is governed by the imperative of integration programmes may be less innovative and more limited in the degree to which they encourage interaction with the host environment. If a course taught by us is precisely the same as the course taught on the home campus there is something amiss. The object of education abroad is to offer courses that enhance or enrich the US curriculum. These will, of course, be of comparative merit in terms of rigor, learning outcomes, assessment criteria and so on: comparability and credibility rather than simple replication is the key objective.

In practice this means that as a minimum the curriculum will reflect the location in some way or another and that, as a consequence, somewhat different pedagogical skills will be demanded of faculty. In education abroad, simply, abroad is a factor in curriculum design. If the course being taught in Prague is identical to that being offered in Trenton, New Jersey the opportunity to benefit from (thus enhance) the content through engagement with the learning environment is lost. The notion of engagement is also relevant in so far as this imposes a pedagogical imperative that is not common on home campuses. Faculty in education abroad are required to demonstrate the interaction between theory and practice; in short, they are required to expand the notion of the learning environment to encompass the classroom and the world beyond those walls. At home the imperative to explore the external environment does not exist in the same way or to the same degree.

The degree to which the course encompasses that objective will be part of what the education abroad programme will want to assess. The educational agenda in education abroad is broader and, perhaps, deeper that of domestic higher education: issues of engagement with the environment are embedded in course content and pedagogy. Part of the curriculum in study abroad is "abroad " itself: educational aspiration exceeds that which is customary on the US campus.

An international educational organisation integrates the notion of abroad into teaching and learning in a manner that would not necessarily be appropriate or realistic on a university campus where the curriculum is rightly and properly primarily designed for domestic students: courses

differ from those offered on the home campus in so far as engagement with the host location is an integrated imperative.

In this context relevance means enrichment and enhancement rather than simple integration.

Conclusion: Reimagining priorities in education abroad.

One way in which education abroad can demonstrate relevance (however that is defined) is by creating learning priorities that are concrete and credible in the broader academic world. This will mean going beyond talking in terms of teaching intercultural or cross-cultural skills. Implicit in those elusive notions 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.

This is ignores some important factors:
a) Culture 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 cultural communities created by shared faith, language, class, 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 Apartheid through cultural analysis? These are not questions that can be properly 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 or perceived relevance of our endeavors.

Learning objectives in education abroad need to go beyond vague notions of culture into specificity. In my organisation we are involved precisely in this discussion. Our aspiration in our Global Cities programmes is to align learning opportunities to outcomes in ways that can specifically address at least some of the concrete implications of the following objectives (that go beyond constraining concepts of culture):

a) To enable participants to go from coping in an urban environment to exploring and analysing the spaces they inhabit. This is intend to reflect a holistic responsibility; the fact that objectives are about the integration of experiential education, formal academics, and student services.

b) To teach students to understand the realities of power, privilege and inequality in urban environments which reflects the political learning opportunities in education abroad.

c) To give students the ability to recognise, describe and interpret examples of the impact of globalisation in the urban environment.

d) To enable participants to describe, and interpret, the differences between their home environment and the host environment with a discernible level of sophistication beyond cliché or stereotype. The intention is to take students beyond the tourist gaze; to link experiential education and classroom learning.

e) To enhance generic academic skills like writing, reading, speaking, listening, observing and, therefore, to empower students to manage their own learning objectives in the present and into the future.

f) To broaden and deepen discipline-specific knowledge through, for example, the addition of international perspectives that challenge their own.

In short, and finally, as a necessary pre-requisite to re-imaging the international experience we need to re-consider and re-form learning priorities to create parity of esteem with other academic endeavours. We need to look very critically and profoundly at what we say about culture, about what we say about authenticity; to construct a discourse based on credible analyses and meaningful realities.