

Study, Service and the Self-Transformed

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In Zimbabwe, I have also become accustomed to being motionless. Being motionless usually feels good, as when I sat with Amai Kyandere on the kitchen hut floor waiting for the water to boil. Sometimes even waiting for a bus that may never come can feel good. It has to do with acceptance, allowing for a slower pace and understanding that nothing is really predictable.

These are the words of an American undergraduate, Perrin Elkind, newly returned from study in Africa. Her story, *Tonderai: Studying Abroad in Zimbabwe* (Fort Bragg, CA: Lost Coast Press, 1998), a moving account of how study in a very different culture can deepen understanding of the self and the world, is a model of what can be achieved at the edges, the frontiers, of American higher education. It serves as a kind of testimony to the flexibility of a system that can expand to include life experiences such as these within its capacious formal structures. These structures are challenged daily as more and more students like Perrin Elkind set out on journeys through mind and space in search of themselves and the world.

If we are to encourage such journeys, we should look anew at the options for foreign study and at the changing patterns of study abroad by American students. More of them are on the move, from a wider range of institutions (thanks in part to growing flexibility on the part of sending institutions and accrediting agencies), and with a much greater range of destinations. They are also going, on average, for shorter periods.

The shift from Europe is significant in percentage terms. The once dominant idea of study abroad as a kind of European finishing school has been replaced, at least in part, by a more eclectic pattern with less emphasis on immersion in traditional western culture and greater emphasis for example on discovering the Americas (the most dramatic increase in numbers relates to Latin America) and on engaging with other, more distant parts of the world (and not just the Europeanized environment of Australia and New Zealand, but the countries of Africa and of east, southeast and south Asia). Such travel patterns put strains on the sending mechanisms—offices of study abroad and engaged faculty members. The need for advanced preparation is made all the more acute by

the shortness of the foreign visits themselves: If a student takes all of his or her time abroad going through the initial stages of adaptation, the time left beyond the threshold stage when the full benefits of the experience accrue, dwindles to nothing. Add to this the fact that the cognitive gap between home and abroad is often large, and it is clear that orientation programs must be planned carefully and reentry programs developed to receive students back into familiar surroundings.

Above all, the programs themselves must be of high quality. Running unusual programs in exotic and inaccessible places requires special skills, a kind that may not be available to individual institutions. Such programs are best left to the experts. The School for International Training (SIT) for example, under whose auspices Perrin Elkind visited Zimbabwe, includes among its offerings programs in over 10 African countries (totals for all U.S. students going to Africa are up by a factor of six over the past 15 years), and in such countries as Thailand, Viet Nam, Nepal, Indonesia and most recently, Mongolia. SIT is also about to start a program in Cuba. Drawing on its years of expertise in foreign study and in work in difficult environments, the School specializes in offering programs in countries and subjects not easily handled by conventional U.S. institutions. Many of these programs involve various forms of hands-on experience, stressing fieldwork, independent study and self-help.

Equally adventurous in its way, though offering programs of a different kind, is the International Partnership for Service Learning (IPSL), which operates semester long and summer programs in some 10 foreign countries in Europe, the Americas and Asia. These programs are roughly evenly divided between conventional study, generally in a host institution such as the University of Montpellier in France, Ben-Gurion University in Israel and Trinity College in the Philippines, and community service in literacy programs, grass-roots community organization, legal defense programs, social work services and a host of other activities. Classroom work and community service are linked in a regular seminar under the leadership of an experienced mentor who helps students process their experiences in the field and relate their classroom learning to their community work.

There is plenty of evidence that prolonged study abroad, particularly when it involves a degree of immersion in a culture very different from one's own, is a transforming experience for many. Leaders of study programs abroad point to the ways in which such experiences challenge received assumptions, teach values and allow students to look at their home-country lives in a different way. We do not need reminding that in the world of tomorrow, with more and more people occupying tighter and tighter physical, intellectual and emotional space, and with increased mobility and easier communication leading to more and more overlap and layering of cultures, young people (and old ones too) need such perspective. The SIT programs are taking students to some of the more remote parts of the world, giving them an opportunity to observe and participate in environments that are rapidly changing and may never again present the kinds of exotic variety that they now display. The programs of the Partnership are approaching this process of change in a different way, by giving students an opportunity actually to participate in mitigating some of the effects of the deprivation and dislocation that can be variously described as longstanding or as products of modernization.

The service learning movement, of which the Partnership is one of the most interesting manifestations, has grown in strength in recent years, in part in response to an expanding realization on the part of educators that uniting theory and practice benefits both sides of the equation: Students learn to derive theory from practice, and to test theory through practical observation. The net result is that a generation of students less adapted to the traditional ways of acquiring knowledge through passive absorption learns in a new way, and perhaps in the process advances its own moral development and the ethic of service to fellow human beings. Service learning has its roots in part in such organizations as Campus Compact whose initial aim was to persuade more students at conventional liberal arts colleges and universities to get involved in volunteer work in the communities around their institutions. But, while it builds on the ethic of community service, its goals are at once deeper and more ambitious: It seeks to make community service not an adjunct but an integral part of formal study. Many of the member institutions of Campus Compact now have their service learning programs, in which they encourage faculty members to develop teaching programs linked to the community and assist them in making the connections.

Community service, too, can be a transforming

experience. Many students, growing up in middle-class homes in suburban neighborhoods, have had little to do with the world revealed to them when they embark on programs taking them into social-service organizations, hospitals and inner-city schools, and they can derive deep satisfaction from combining their own studies with the well-being of their communities. They can also learn new ways of looking at the world, and through the formal learning process, share their experiences with others. Furthermore, while so much of classroom learning is based on competition, community service revolves around cooperation: Such service puts students in situations in which they maximize their productivity by working effectively with others.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing that the idea behind service-learning, of linking the classroom with the larger world, theory with practice, is an idea of worldwide potency. While we can find some of its roots in the long-established American belief in volunteer service, an idea fostered and promoted by enlightened liberal arts institutions over many years—or in the conjunction of education and practice that lies behind the land-grant colleges of the 19th century—it has many genealogies in many traditions across the world. In 1998, a group of educators and representatives of non-governmental organizations from the United States and 15 countries around the world met at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin, to review the progress of service learning initiatives in the United States and abroad. A report published by the IPSL the following year (Howard A. Berry and Linda A. Chisholm, *Service Learning in Higher Education Around the World*, New York: IPSL, 1999) described service learning programs in these countries and 15 others—programs linked with teaching (in Indonesia, Israel, Ecuador, the Czech Republic, for example), health care (in Japan, Jamaica, Liberia, France...), community development (the Philippines, Mexico, Kyrgyzstan, Korea...) and so on. These programs include those of individual professors or institutions and also nationwide and region-wide efforts. Service learning, in short, has become an important element in the higher education systems of many countries, and in the academic programs of numerous individual institutions. "I would like not only to study at my desk, but also to go to the place, to touch and feel," writes Miyuki Araki in the IPSL report (p. 22). "Service learning gives me first-hand experience of team work and brings me in contact with people, especially children," adds Ifeoma Nnaji of Nigeria; "I consider this vital because I want to be a doctor."

One reason for convening the Wingspread conference was to explore international cooperation in service learning. When service learning and study abroad are brought together, they form a powerful combination. Students find themselves studying in settings very different from those of their home country, which call forth all the adaptation skills that we associate with study abroad: Learning a new culture while attending to the ordinary needs of daily living, participating in a dialogue with those around them in a different idiom or a different language. But this challenge to their sense of self is not simply a journey of self-discovery, not simply an adaptation that, once embarked upon, benefits them and them alone: It is a means to an end. Students in service-learning programs adapt to their surroundings not simply to advance their own agenda but to enter into a partnership, a compact, with a community needing their services. So there is a collectively recognizable goal and purpose to their adaptation, and the effort that they expend on it has its rewards not only for them but also for the people they serve. The willingness to serve and the desire to do it well are powerful motivators, hastening an adaptation that once a threshold has been crossed, allows students to benefit most fully from the cultural experience. One reason (or so I believe, without benefit of research) why international service learning is so effective is the fact that students are put in positions in which they have to adapt fast, and in which strong supportive mechanisms are in place to hasten the adaptation.

A few years ago, asked to speak to an audience of specialists in international service learning about my own sense of why such learning works, I enumerated a series of points that perhaps bear repeating. Abstract learning, I declared (and as I have suggested above), is easier when it is rooted in practical experience, and the experience itself is enriched when it is linked directly with learning. There are those who argue that we sacrifice objectivity when we allow the practical or the here-and-now to intrude into the classroom, but the objectivity that we allegedly sacrifice may be the objectivity of the status quo, the ideology of the powerful. A classroom in which real-life experiences are analyzed, and in which guidance is provided for dealing with such real-life experiences, may be a messier place than the antiseptic environment of clinical objectivity, and it may wreak havoc with test-taking and unambiguous competition for grades—but, as my very examples imply, education is never value-free. I might add that it doesn't always work, and a system that encourages tempered self-worth may be a better teaching environment than one that simply sorts, rewards and punishes. Teach-

ers working in a service-learning environment may become better teachers of students (as opposed to machines for the unerring separation of sheep from goats) and better observers of societies and cultures.

Far from value-free, education is in fact a journey with maps and compasses: Namely the values of the teacher, and the collective and individual values of the students themselves. The best way to learn the values of sharing and service is by deriving them from concrete, unambiguous situations where the human need to cooperate is made incontrovertibly clear. Perhaps I should add my belief that the right way to learn self-worth is by observing one's ability to better the self-worth of others.

But, of course, there is more to *international* service learning than this, since participants find themselves living in another country, in a minority. The very rendering of service raises a host of complex issues, beginning with a sense on the part of students that they are simply doing what Americans so often do—trying to make other people more like themselves, and exercising their sense of generosity by bestowing it on those they regard as less fortunate. But such delusions of social beneficence are rapidly countered by the discovery of value systems that reshuffle the priorities or build other assumptions into family and community. With good guidance, particularly from in-country specialists, students learn to serve on other terms than their own, and it is this perhaps more than anything else, that they take with them when they leave. Living in another culture and critically absorbing its values may be the best way to prepare young people for the multicultural and globalized world of today and tomorrow—a world in which, despite the rather frequent assertions of our leaders, we cannot expect to live by one standard and have others live by another.

There is a further value to be associated with international service learning: When the students leave their hosts to return home, they leave something behind. The International Partnership, for example, is not simply engaged in providing students with a collection of opportunities: It is also embarked on helping a range of institutions work better and deliver better services—an orphanage in Kingston, Jamaica, a kindergarten in Guadalajara, a literacy program in Quito and so on. One measure of the Partnership's success is the success of the agencies it serves, and so it takes these connections very seriously. It is significant that many of the students who pass through its programs develop lasting friendships with those they serve and with their fellow-workers. Many return to their host countries at a later

date. Some go into the master's program in International Service run jointly by the Partnership and universities in Britain, Jamaica and Mexico. As for their hosts, they perhaps develop a new awareness of what it means to be an American, and some of our better values perhaps rub off on them.

Recently, Linda Chisholm, of the Partnership, prepared a manual, *Charting A Hero's Journey* (New York: IPSL, 1999), designed through a series of readings and exercises, to assist students in keeping journals and in reflecting on their experience abroad or in community service, or in the combination of the two that is the Partnership's particular mission. This wonderfully practical and intelligent volume contains excerpts from published journals spanning 200 years—journals which tell us both that the anxieties of travel and of service have always been with us, and that others went before us, into an often far more mysterious world. James Boswell and Dr. Johnson led the way, trudging through the Highlands, but Jane Addams, Mary Kingsley, Octavio Paz and others told their stories too, and do so again in Linda Chisholm's book. Of all the excerpts, I think I like the ones by Langston Hughes, who at one point observes, acerbically, "Six months anywhere is enough to begin to complicate life. By that time, if you stay in one place, you are bound to know people too well for things to be any longer simple."

That is what Perrin Elkind discovered. And she returned transformed.