

March 7, 2008

American Students Abroad Can't Be 'Global Citizens'

By TALYA ZEMACH-BERSIN

In September 2005 I boarded a plane to Delhi with 23 other American students for a semester-long Tibetan-studies program in India, Nepal, and Tibet. I set off wide-eyed, hopeful, and full of expectations for what was sure to be a life-changing experience.

The program had promised "exotic" excursions through "traditional and contemporary Tibetan and Himalayan culture," and I was eager to develop a greater awareness of the world beyond American borders. Both my home university and my program provider had informed me that by going abroad and immersing myself in a foreign culture, I would become a "global citizen."

"Total cultural immersion," I was advised, is what makes study abroad such a tremendous opportunity for developing a better understanding of a new culture. I was encouraged to "act like the locals," "be a resident," and "become a member" of my host community. I was expected to assimilate into my new environment by speaking the local language, bargaining for prices, and participating in everyday life as if I myself were Tibetan.

But once I arrived overseas, I quickly realized that studying abroad as an American student is far more complicated than simply learning how others speak and eat. International education entails navigating the social, historical, and political realities of what it means to be American in a world of undeniable difference and inequality.

My home-stay parents, Jangchup and Sonam, were Tibetans living in exile in Dharamsala, India — a town flooded with tourists eager to see the Dalai Lama, buy goods made by refugees, snap photographs of themselves with beggars, and trek the foothills of the Himalayas. While Jangchup made peanut butter in the bedroom (the kitchen was too small) and Sonam knitted gloves to sell to tourists in the marketplace, my American classmates and I studied their culture, language, and religion.

Although they called me "daughter," and I called them Amala and Pala, Jangchup and Sonam didn't treat me like family but as a guest of honor. Despite my protests, I always received five times more food than they served themselves, and I was never allowed to make my bed, step into the kitchen, or even turn on the bathroom light myself.

During the last week of my stay, my academic directors handed me a sealed envelope containing a cash payment for Jangchup and Sonam's hospitality, which I was expected to give to them. As a first-world student, I had literally purchased a third-world family for my own self-improvement as a global citizen. While I was more than willing to give Jangchup and Sonam the well-deserved payment, I began to question the relationship of global citizenship to power and privilege.

A few days after we left Dharmasala, my class flew from Katmandu, Nepal, to Lhasa, Tibet, and landed at a brand-new Chinese airport. My classmates and I were aware that our newfound "families," having fled Chinese persecution in Tibet, could not see their beloved home again without risking their lives. As Americans, our national citizenship, passports, skin color, and currency exchange rate all worked in our favor, and — complain as we might have done about having only two shirts to wear, as recommended per our packing lists — there was no pretending that ours was a trip about sacrifice. Unlike our host families, we could go wherever we wanted, from family homes to fancy tourist clubs, from private burial ceremonies and temple ruins to Chinese-owned stores selling imitation North Face jackets. We had bought a product, and we expected to consume our experience.

The cumulative privilege of my race, nationality, education, mobility, and class shone brighter than all of the candles in the Dalai Lama's temple. I was a foreigner in all respects. It was impossible for me to "act like the locals" when everywhere I went I was viewed and treated as exactly what I am: a white, advantaged American. In many places, I could not walk down the street without being asked by locals for money or assistance of some kind. In no way did I feel like a universal or apolitical citizen of the world.

Yet cultural immersion and global citizenship remained curriculum ideals, even when they were far from what my classmates and I were actually experiencing. Caught between a study-abroad education that demanded I "fit in," and an experiential reality that forced me to think critically about what it means to be an American abroad, I found that I had not been prepared with the necessary tools to fully engage with, and learn from, my experiences. Because the curriculum did not include critical discussions about the ways in which my classmates and I were interacting with our surroundings, I had little ability to make sense of the days and months as they flew by.

I came home confused and unable to respond to the flood of questions such as "How was your time abroad?" Or assumptions like "It must have been amazing. I'm sure you have gained and grown so much." Like many other students who study abroad, I found that the program's curriculum focused on cultural and language studies while avoiding the very issues that were in many ways most compelling and relevant to our experiences. Why had we not analyzed race, identity, and privilege when those factors were informing every one of our interactions? Why was there never a discussion about commodification when our relationships with host families were built on a commodified relationship? Wasn't a history of colonialism and contemporary imperialism affecting the majority of our experiences and influencing how host nationals viewed us? Was there nothing to be said about the power dynamics of claiming global citizenship?

My semester abroad taught me that there is a vast discrepancy between the rhetoric of international education and the reality of what many students like myself experience while abroad. Although the world may be increasingly interconnected, global systems of inequality, power, privilege, and difference are always present. That is the reality that many students face during their semesters abroad and continue to think about upon their return.

The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee recently passed a bill that seeks to create a \$80-million annual foundation for study abroad, in order to increase almost fivefold the number of

American students who study overseas, and to make such study more accessible to lower-income students.

This affirmation of the values of international education is a positive step, but it is important that we examine the quality and content of study-abroad curricula.

American students who travel abroad cannot be expected to transcend historical, political, social, and global systems of power in order to become cross-culturally immersed "global citizens." We can, however, be asked to become internationally conscious and self-aware American citizens who are responsible for thinking about those critical issues.

An international education that focuses on American-based discursive ideals rather than experiential realities can hardly be said to position students in this country for successful lives of global understanding. Rather, such an education may inadvertently be a recipe for the perpetuation of global ignorance, misunderstanding, and prejudice. It is not possible for me to be a citizen of the world, but I am an American citizen. Higher-education institutions would be wise to integrate that same truth about American students who study abroad into the international education they provide.

Talya Zemach-Bersin is a 2007 graduate of Wesleyan University.

<http://chronicle.com> Section: Commentary Volume 54, Issue 26, Page A34

<http://chronicle.com/article/American-Students-Abroad/25527>