

Roberta Waldbaum

International Service Learning and Student Values: Seeking Higher Ground

Roberta K. Waldbaum, University of Denver

Roberta K. Waldbaum holds an M.A. in Italian language and literature (University of Colorado, Boulder) and a Ph.D. in Higher Education (University of Denver) with an emphasis on second language acquisition. She is Assistant Professor of Italian at the University of Denver and the Director of the University of Denver/University of Bologna International Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Bologna. In 1992 she was awarded the Driscoll Master Teacher Award and in 1998 was the recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award at the University of Denver. Her research, conference papers, presentations, and publications include the areas of language competencies and study abroad, international cinema, international service learning, and Italy and the Grand Tour. Her recent publications include articles on study abroad and language competencies and cinema and the teaching of Italian culture.

Abstract

The renowned Italian novelist and semiologist, Umberto Eco, writes in the essay "When the Other Appears on the Scene" that: "It is the other, it is his look, that defines and forms us. Just as we cannot live without eating or sleeping, we cannot understand who we are without the look and the response of the other" (Five Moral Pieces, 2001, p. 23).

Discovering ourselves in the reflective gaze of the other requires the construction of a number of carefully crafted mechanisms that enhance self-awareness and develop humane values and ethical behavior. It also requires a learning environment that is conducive to the discovery of the self and the other. Moreover, the gaze of the other by which we seek to define ourselves is reflective of the extent to which we are able and willing to tolerate and embrace diversity.

This paper explores these issues and suggests that institutions of higher education play a critical role in the development of educational means for looking both inward and outward in the promotion of the values that facilitate positive social change. The growing field of international service learning, which combines academic study and volunteer service abroad, provides the lens by which to examine the issues. The establishment of the University of Denver/University of Bologna International Center for Civic Engagement, housed at the University of Bologna, Italy, serves as an example of the contribution of American universities to service-learning and civic engagement in an international setting with the two partner universities envisioning the Center as a site for the coordination of community problem-solving activities which build humanitarian values. The underlying mission of the DU/Bologna Center is based on the fundamental principle that service learning contributes to moral development, to the promotion of values and a service ethic, and to the appreciation and acceptance of diversity. Placing students into carefully selected

and planned environments that promote ethical and character development while serving a community need diverts emphasis away from the self to the other. This form of education abroad challenges traditional and lingering notions of study abroad as the modern counterpart of the Grand Tour in which immersing oneself in a different culture was considered *de rigueur* for self-enrichment and for gaining the trappings of cultural literacy. Insights gleaned from this initiative suggest that education abroad with a service-learning component builds humanitarian values and affects students propensity for engaged world citizenship, civic commitment and social responsibility.

Introduction

The Wall Street Journal recently published an article with an accompanying photograph entitled "The Deluxe Semester Abroad." The article related that despite an atmosphere of heightened international tension, terrorism, and war, the flow of American students abroad had not abated, but had increased. It also related that many American colleges and universities were attracting students to their study abroad programs by offering enticing add-ons, as inferred from the picture of the two young American women studying abroad in Thailand riding on an elephant. The caption read: "Even Now, Overseas Study Is Up as the Programs Get Plush: Guitar Classes, a Stop in Fiji." American colleges, it said, "far from cutting back these days are taking study-abroad programs to a whole new level of high-end learning" (Bernstein, 2003).

This paper will outline a very different philosophy and model of education abroad -- one that guides students away from self-interest, diversion, and the embellishments of Grand Tour, toward a commitment to serve others. In this model students choose and are prepared to participate in international service learning and civic engagement and are placed into carefully selected and planned environments that promote ethical and character development while serving a community need.

Self-Discovery, the Other, and Service Learning

In his essay "When the Other Appears on the Scene" the Italian novelist and semiologist, Umberto Eco, writes that: "It is the other, it is his look, that defines and forms us. Just as we cannot live without eating or sleeping, we cannot understand who we are without the look and the response of the other" (Eco, 1997/2000, p. 23).

Discovering ourselves in the reflective gaze of the other requires the construction of a series of carefully crafted mechanisms to enhance self-awareness and to develop humane values and ethical behavior. It also requires learning environments that are conducive to the discovery of the self and the other. Moreover, the gaze of the other by which we seek to define ourselves is reflective of the extent to which we are able and willing to tolerate and embrace diversity. Colleges and universities play a critical role in the development of educational opportunities for inward and outward reflection in the promotion of the values that facilitate positive social change. In this paper, the growing field of international service learning, which combines academic study and volunteer service abroad, provides the lens by which to examine these issues.

Universities as sites of Civic Engagement in an International Setting The University of Denver (DU) is actively committed to service learning and civic engagement. The university's mission statement affirms that DU is a "private institution dedicated to the public good," and the provost, Robert Coombe, views the university's commitment to the public good as an "engine for positive social change" (Provost's Conference on the Public Good, May 11, 2003). DU houses a Center for Service Learning and Civic Engagement, directed by Dr. C. David Lisman, which promotes student, faculty, and community development in support of our civic effort. Although many colleges and universities have developed service learning programs, ours is unique in grounding our efforts in terms of our civic engagement goal and integrating service learning into the curriculum. The program recruits and trains faculty members across the disciplines in community-based learning and develops viable community outreach efforts that are ongoing and sustainable. It also provides opportunities for faculty and students to do deeper community work linked to academic content and student learning objectives than are normally offered in more direct service community outreach efforts. We are creating sustainable relationships with our community partnerships whereby we can contribute to community improvement over the long term.

The University of Denver/University of Bologna International Center for Civic Engagement

The university's expertise in this area has contributed to expanding our efforts from the local and national to the international setting, building upon the relationships we have established with our international partners. One of the university's strongest international linkages is with the University of Bologna with whom there has been an active exchange of students and faculty since 1994. The two institutions formally established the University of Denver /University of Bologna International Center for Civic Engagement (the Center) in the historic heart of Bologna in the fall of 2002 in order to pursue joint efforts in addressing community needs and participating in community problem solving. The two partner institutions envision the Center as a site for the coordination of community problem-solving activities that build humanitarian values.

The Mission of the DU/Bologna Center The underlying mission of the Center is based on the fundamental principle that service learning and civic engagement contribute to moral development, to the promotion of values and a service ethic, and to the appreciation and acceptance of diversity. As a member of a Civic Engagement Cluster, the Center is part of a large collaborative research effort with other European and American universities that are currently conducting independent research projects. By combining the independent initiatives undertaken by the various international members, an array of possibilities emerge for comparison of findings and the sharing of information in pursuance of common goals.

The Center has developed a number of broad and more narrowly based activities to support its mission. Foremost among these is the creation of a program of study that heightens the social and political awareness of local realities while providing relevant opportunities for service and research. In addition, collaborative relationships with pre-existent agencies have been identified to individuate opportunities for service projects that address pressing

social needs. The Center is also active in the promotion of cultural initiatives, in terms of conferences and seminars with socio-political themes that are open to the academic and local communities and to the city of Bologna. In the near future the Center will become the repository of a bibliographic collection of publications and projects within the university community and the city of Bologna that will include an on-line and physical library collection. In preparation for the sharing and comparison of findings, the Center will dedicate time and space to the development of experientially based and problem-focused pedagogy and curriculum for student and faculty engagement in community and civic participation. Faculty, students, and community members will have the opportunity to evaluate successes as well as to recommend necessary changes in the activities of the Center.

The Academic Program and the First Student Cohort Group

Twelve DU students participated in the inaugural academic program in fall quarter 2002, followed by a smaller group of four students in spring quarter 2003. The on-site program, which is open to both Italian and non-Italian speakers, includes an intensive Italian language course, an academic course on contemporary Italian social issues taught by a DU faculty member, a seminar series on contemporary Italy taught by professors from the University of Bologna and professionals in the community, and a service-learning project. The academic courses are closely linked to the service projects and cover topics such as "Italian Cinema and Society: Confronting Social Issues on Celluloid," "Human Rights and Film: Perspectives through Service in Italy," and "The Present and Future of Democracy and Civic Engagement in the Age of Mass Communication." The primary objective of the academic courses is to facilitate a deeper understanding of the context of service by studying a number of critical societal issues impacting Italy and the Mediterranean region, given Italy's strategic geographic placement at the doorstep of the Balkans and the Middle East. By studying a number of the major social concerns confronting contemporary Italian society such as immigration, human rights, organized crime, politics, and education, students have the opportunity to confront and question their personal values while asking important questions about social justice, ethical behavior and service in a globalized world.

Volunteer Site Placements

Volunteer site placements in the Bologna community run the gamut from tutoring students in English at a multicultural center for at-risk children, to working in a local prison with a Bologna professor on a moral education project for prisoners, to volunteering at a center helping women involved in the slave trade regain control over their lives after being forced into prostitution.

Preparing Students for International Service Learning

Students must be carefully prepared for effective international service learning. To this end, I have created and taught a required service-learning course in which students are exposed to the concepts of and approaches to active cultural understanding and civic engagement

and the pairing of these concepts and approaches to service projects with assessable learning outcomes.

The course meets the basic requirements of a service-learning course in that it is linked to academic content, designed to enhance and enrich in- and out-of-class learning, informed with knowledge from the disciplines, imbued with a commitment to civic engagement, and filled with opportunities for students to reflect and write about the ways the service project informs and expands disciplinary understanding. Specific goals of the course are:

• To encourage students to think critically about and gain an understanding of current social and civic issues of a given community

• To provide students the experience of applying service-learning theory and methods to "real world" issues

• To understand the nature of the community and identify current community issues and the role of service agencies in addressing them.

• To examine how University of Bologna students, faculty, and administration regard and integrate higher education community outreach efforts.

The four pre-departure and on-site components of the course include the following:

• in-residence pre-departure

• international field-based

• capstone project on-site

• assessable product (portfolio).

In-Residence Pre-Departure

In order to complete the service project successfully, it is imperative that students gain a basic understanding of Italian culture and civic life, with a specific concentration on the city of Bologna and the University of Bologna as examples of how Italian institutions of higher education contribute to the maintenance and strengthening of civic life. In addition, course components include an examination of pressing contemporary Italian social issues, an introduction to theories and practices of US and international service learning, a familiarity with inter-cultural competencies, and the practical implications of engaging in service abroad.

The four DU in-residence components include the following:

• Historical and Contemporary Context for International Service;

• Cultural Context for International Service (characteristics and assumptions about Italian and American cultures and their implications for planning a successful international service project);

• Intercultural Communication Context for Effective International Service; and

Â· Practical Context for International Service (living, studying, and volunteering).

International Field-based Project

Students are required to complete twenty-five hours of community-based service learning in the city of Bologna that links them with diverse community members in carefully selected service projects. To enrich the experience, participants have the unique opportunity to read, discuss and write about the academic issues and to translate theory and methods of service learning into practice in the experiential learning component of this academically-based course. It is through participating in real world encounters with people involved in social issues that students are able to compare their understanding of the role of U.S. institutions of higher education in promoting civic engagement with the Italian approach.

Capstone

In the post-field section of the course, students connect the in-residence section to the field experience. During this segment, which takes place in country, students reinterpret, integrate and formulate their learning into a whole experience.

Portfolio Project

The portfolio project includes opportunities for students to reflect, write, and report about the ways in which the service project informs and expands disciplinary understanding and has contributed to their interest in and understanding of themselves as contributing members of a globalized society.

Ethical Development: In Their Own Words

Research has demonstrated that service learning contributes to the moral and spiritual development of young people (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Moral and spiritual development go hand in hand with intellectual development. David Lisman (1996) reports that courses that include a service-learning component promote ethical development and a sense of concern for other people more significantly than courses without a service-learning component. Preliminary findings from this program suggest that students who choose to enroll in a program abroad with a service-learning component are often on a spiritual quest for self-identity. As one student in the program wrote, "I have become a slightly different version of myself that I never would have become. I really do think that I saw myself become a more complete person and being here allowed me to see myself grow." The experience afforded students the opportunity to appreciate diversity. "I have a much better idea of how the world works, its richness and diversity," said a student. Personal and interpersonal development became key themes in their writing. One student wrote that "The personal growth I have gained is hard to convey in words. Coming into this program I was lacking the confidence about myself and what I represented. I will return to the States with a better comprehension of what I want to become." Another student expressed that "I was finally able to realize what is most important in my life - people. For now I realize that it doesn't matter what I do in life if it doesn't have meaning to

someone.â€ All of the students reported that they had undergone significant and rapid change in a brief period of time.

Conclusion

The underlying mission of the DU/Bologna Center is based on the fundamental principle that service learning contributes to moral development, to the promotion of values and a service ethic, and to the appreciation and acceptance of diversity. Placing students into carefully selected and planned environments that promote ethical and character development while serving a community need diverts emphasis away from the self and toward the other. This model of education abroad challenges traditional, lingering notions of study abroad as the modern counterpart of the Grand Tour. The young women seated on the elephant in Thailand have been metamorphosed into the committed students teaching English to multi-cultural groups of children, or into caring students volunteering with women forced into prostitution who are working to create more promising futures for themselves and their families.

Insights gleaned from this initiative suggest that education abroad with a service-learning component builds humanitarian values and affects studentsâ€™ propensity for engaged world citizenship, civic commitment and social responsibility and guides them into a life dedicated to the public good.

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