

Dr Michael Woolf
Deputy President for Strategic Development
CAPA International Education
mwoolf@capa.org

DRAFT

Has anybody seen the environment?

Presentation for panel : Beyond Anthropomorphic Definitions of Community: Sustainability and Environmental Justice in Study Abroad

Introduction

I have approached this topic with caution. I am no expert and, as an unreconstructed Londoner, the idea of the natural world is somewhat alarming and potentially menacing. It is, at least, unhygienic unless there are changing facilities, a decent bar, and signs clearly indicating where you may and may not go, and what animals are nice and what are not.

However I am also aware that environmental studies is no only about pastoral worlds and bucolic folk (though rather a lot of it seems to be). I am also conscious of the fact that environmentalism and environmental studies are not the same thing. Environmentalism frequently seems to demand an activist, political agenda usually resistant to globalisation, urbanisation, .and development.

So, this is not an area of untroubled consensus. Debates around conservation and preservation, in Africa, for example raise very distinctive ethical imperatives. In short, the notion of environment is more problematic than might be suggested in the dominant narratives of study abroad. Despite the complexities and semantic mists, there are very clear ways in which environmental studies and study abroad occupy a connected educational space.

Environmental Studies and Study Abroad

There is at least one direct relationship between the agenda of study abroad and that of environmental studies. If part of the agenda of study abroad is to study the place we designate abroad, then a focus on that environment is mandatory.

There is also, however, a complicating sense in which environmental studies is driven by a distinctive political imperative: a response to the assumption that human action has damaged the global environment. The contested notion of global warming reflects the degree to which these discussions are politicised and made complex by matters of scientific and theological belief.

The concept of environment is also, of course, not simple. It is our micro world, that tree, forest, street, and everywhere. In contrast, study abroad is about some form of specific relocation to a city, country, region. In the geographical context environmental studies may ask questions that are broader and narrower than those relevant to study abroad.

In another context, the concepts of environmental studies and environmentalism demonstrate that the ways in which we define the boundaries of knowledge are under reconstruction. It may be argued that environmental studies is an inter or multi-disciplinary area of investigation. It may also be argued that the area demonstrates the emergence of a

new discipline in which traditional boundaries become redundant: the borders of knowledge are artificial: Science used to be a branch of Natural Philosophy; Anthropology was invented in the nineteenth century; Alchemy is rarely found in the curriculum of US higher education. In one sense, global studies may accelerate the redundancies of traditional categories and study abroad is, potentially, in the vanguard of those processes.

Defining environment

A first priority in this discussion is to clarify what we mean by environment. In the study abroad context, however, there has been a tendency to focus rather narrowly on what we mean by environment and, thus, minimize the potential for radical innovation. There are, by way of demonstration, at least four constituents in what we mean by environment:

- a) The natural and animal world.
- b) The built environment.
- c) The human population that inhabits those environments.
- d) The factors that impact upon the ways in which that population interacts with natural, animal and built environments: ethics, politics, myths and the myriad of other factors that shape behaviors and ideologies.

Most study abroad programmes in practice define environmental studies more narrowly within the first three categories: nature, built environment and people. If we create a more inclusive view of what constitutes the environment the focus is usefully wider.

The focus on environment as the natural and animal world raises familiar questions of the impact of human development, urban expansion, exploitation of resources, the ethics of

the use of resources, the imperative for conservation, and so on. Theories of global warming derive from these emphases as does the question of the degree to which development and nature may coexist. The implicit imperative is driven by a quasi-apocalyptic narrative.

Closely connected to this area is the consideration of the impact of the places we have built, in particular the implication of growing urbanization. Over 50% of the world's population lives in cities yet they represent about 2% of the world's surface. That alone is a significant factor in any educational agenda based on environmental studies. The impact of built environment raises numerous questions including the scale and pace of urban construction; the impact of that construction on architectural heritage; pollution and the unequal exploitation of resources; the impact on population mobility and so on.

An area of environmental studies that demands equal attention is, simply, people. Without people, natural environments are Edenic: dreamed locations that have little to do with our agenda or our experience. A focus on populations raises different questions. These are not simply or only issues of biology, technology, science, or even architecture and urban development. In study abroad this aspect of environmental studies needs to involve a re-consideration of what is meant by community: people in association. The changing nature of our environment has had a profound impact on what we mean by community and has equally challenged notions of identity.

In study abroad we conventionally create learning objectives that include the aspiration to encourage community engagement. This may fail to take into account the fact that community is transformed, fragmented, and a problematic context. The ways in which we now live and work, are fluid and mutable. We do not have the luxury of continuity; the canon of necessary knowledge that the older generation hands on to the younger has become conditional, of fragile utility and limited relevance. Our forefathers may have worked the

land in a fashion that they believed was timeless. The skills they taught their children were passed on through generations who may well have been born, lived and died in the same place. Knowledge was rooted in community. We do not have that surety or security. Time is no longer measured by the rising and setting of the sun. Community is no longer defined by geography. Our reality is that, as Karl Marx wrote: “All that is solid melts into air...”

When we prioritize engagement with community we are encouraging a static and largely redundant notion. Community is no longer defined by place and identity is a problematic notion. It is an objective based on nostalgia. We can expose students to the remnants of community but it is a form of archaeology – not without value certainly, but not representative of the global realities within which most of function.

The fourth factor that receives insufficient attention is the manner in which environments are built beyond the concrete. These are not simply objective spaces but constructs shaped by myths, stories, ideologies, histories. Places, like countries, are imaginative ways of defining environments; landscapes are manufactured through the imagination. Without considering the action of mind on environment, our perspectives are narrowed and impoverished. In this context, we need obviously to ask a radically different set of questions about how the environment is perceived and what factors impact upon those perceptions.

In education abroad the manner in which Europe is envisaged illustrates the process.

Europe is imagined in at least three different ways:

It is a fragile political association of diverse countries. Depending on your focus the space may be redefined as, for example, the space in which the centre moved eastwards after 1989.

In any case, it is a space that is neither static nor easily defined. It is also composed of

individual countries. If we teach students about Spain, Italy or Greece, the relationship with some version of Europe is likely to be part of the curriculum. Thus, Europe is of course apolitical idea, a shifting collection of countries and, simultaneously, a set of associations, myths, stories and legends that have shaped Europe into a single entity in the American mind.

In that construct, Europe is a single entity; it is an accumulation of meanings and iconographic images rather than a real political and geographical space. This version of Europe deeply permeates US perceptions. This is the Europe of Washington Irving, Henry James, Mark Twain and generations of American writers and explorers. The iconography of study abroad frequently endorses and enforces this idea of Europe and it is the environment that study abroad students frequently seek to inhabit.¹ It is characterised by High Art, historical density, social complexity. This idea of Europe is shaped as a poetic device formed more by the imagination than by political, economic or geographical realities. Europe in the American imagination is, in this manifestation, a single concept: a landscape rich in art, histories, and poetic symbols. Those conditions are necessary elements in our understanding of what we mean by European environments. They are as formative and as real as the Europe of nations and the European Union.

Conclusion

In the ways in which we consider environment studies we need to go beyond reductive and simplistic categorizations. The idea of the environment needs to be considered in a context wider than is the current norm. It is not a given reality but a complex mixture of what God has made, of what man has built, of populations in flux, communities in fragments, and the myths, legends, beliefs and historical memories that permeate those places: the places in which we teach and study. Environment cannot be measured only by what we can observe,

measure or photograph. In study abroad, the focus on environment needs to go beyond geography.

The idea of environment challenges the boundaries of our academic conventions. If we oversimplify we deprive students of the capacity to think within and beyond those artificial conventions. Our educational obligation is to avoid simplification and reaffirm the aphorism attributed to Einstein: Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.

ⁱ Consider, by way of example, Disney's Magic Kingdom. This is a version of Europe invented in the USA and, subsequently, ironically re-exported to Euro-Disney. It is a quasi-Romantic fiction: Europe as a landscape dreamed and invented in America, modelled out of Grimm's fairy tales, populated by the princes and princesses of the imagination inhabiting romantic castles of dream. What the Magic Kingdom in France offers is an ideal metaphor for an aspect of Europe as it is shaped in the American mind. The Sleeping Beauty Castle, at the heart of Disneyland Paris, is based upon a Bavarian castle commissioned by ("Mad King) Ludwig II in the nineteenth century as homage to Richard Wagner. Thus, when Disney seeks to embody a notion of romance he draws upon a legendary version of Europe.