Country and culture: The grand illusion

The late great American comedian and philosopher, Lenny Bruce, did not have a domestic life that was calm and untroubled. Some of that that may be due to the advice he gave about the conduct of relationships. He suggested that these should be characterised by sustained and repeated falsehoods. In fact, he urged protagonists in the human drama always to lie to each other, even about the most trivial of matters. If you were going to the shop to buy a newspaper, you should always tell your partner that you were going to buy cigarettes. In that way, lying would become natural and convincing. Thus, when you needed the big lie, it would contain the illusion of verisimilitude. (It is this principle that explains my current matrimonial status).

I would like to open my argument by applying Mr Bruce’s principle. The particular falsehood I would like to put before you is this: “I am an American.” I am, in fact, as some of you may know, a lapsed Jew from East London. Thus, not really a citizen, but a subject of Her Majesty the Queen who reigns nominally over the Disunited Queendom.

That said, there was a time when I might have become an American. I could have sworn falsely that I had never been a member of the Communist Party; I could have sworn allegiance to the flag and would have sung the great American national anthem with gusto. It is certainly more stirring than ours wherein we celebrate our slavery (long to reign over us). So there are circumstances in which I could have truly said “I am an American” or, more accurately, with many millions of others, “I have become an American.”

We might consider what that really means. It is obviously about citizenship in so far as it describes a legal status: membership of a national entity that grants rights and imposes obligations. It requires allegiance to that entity. In some cases, it may indicate affection for certain foods (Apple pie), sports, principles (my civil rights embrace the Second Amendment and, though I am not carrying right now, I have the right to bear arms), as Marco Rubio recently
reminded the US electorate: "The Second Amendment is a constitutional right. I think it's just as important as any of the other rights in our constitution."

There is a plethora of other ways in which I might signal my identity as an American; perhaps I am mono-lingual and equate national health systems with communism; if I live in New York, I like bagels and pepper my language with Yiddish argot (the klutz takes me for a schmuck); if I live in rural Georgia I probably like grits (a mess o’) and think that New York is run by Satan. These and other predilections help to define my sense of identity.

I am, therefore, a citizen with certain behaviours and beliefs that others might recognise as American. The New Yorker, though, may have little in common with the resident of rural Georgia, let alone with the immigrant from Haiti or the proud Daughter of the American Revolution (who oddly claims status by association with a bunch of unruly Bostonian ruffians). What this demonstrates, of course, is that the sentence “I am an American” may mean any number of things but it has nothing to do with a common cultural identity, whatever that phrase may mean.

Quite simply, this is an example of a basic misconception that permeates the unconsidered rhetoric of study abroad. Countries do not equate with cultures. Africa offers an even more obvious example of this fact. The countries that make up Africa (and what we call the Middle East, by the way) are artificial constructs, invented by European colonial powers as part of a sequence of post-conflict treaties without any reference whatsoever to indigenous associations, geographical boundaries, or identities, as the subsequent history of this troubled continent indicates. In 1890, the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury described the process of nation construction in what is often known as “the scramble for Africa”:

We have been engaged in drawing lines upon maps where no white man’s foot has ever trod; we have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew where the mountains and rivers and lakes were. (McCorquodale, R. and Pangalangan, R. 2001, p. 867)
Despite this geo-political, geo-historical reality, study abroad practitioners persist in propagating the grand illusion that countries and cultures align and, thus, that cross-cultural or inter-cultural issues are at the core of their endeavours.

Study abroad is being constructed on the basis of an obvious error: countries are constructed by war, accidents, greed, cynical colonial deals, and a myriad of other factors that almost never include cultural identities. Instead of teaching students about geo-political histories, we compromise academic credibility by embedding historical distortions in the prevailing discourse. We rarely teach students about how the countries they visit are constructed; nor do we customarily explain that these are fragile and mutable. Where, for example, is Yugoslavia? Montenegro came, went, and came back again. The Kurds are, perhaps, a nation but not a country. Syria and Iraq are disastrous examples of the settlements that ended WWI and reflect the failure of T.E. Lawrence’s vision of Pan-Arab cohesion. Nobody who comes from the islands in which I reside knows where they live: Britain, Great Britain (there is an oxymoron), the United Kingdom (who are we kidding?). Countries are not natural or permanent structures but been formed and unformed throughout history.

Students cannot understand the worlds they inhabit without understanding that basic reality.

What we do in study abroad is to take students from one country to another for educational purposes. We may or may not take students from one culture to another; what we certainly do is take them from one political and historical construct to another. When cultural issues are placed at the center of education abroad we are demonstrating a failure to understand the realities of history; we create learning priorities that are anodyne and that lead us to focus on matters of, at most, secondary significance.

Critical questions of history, politics, religious difference, inequality, social injustice, nationalism, racism, tribalism, conflict are muted because culture is a less disturbing and challenging subject than, for example, the politics of global injustice. These questions are not, however, at the core of what we teach. Instead we are myopically fixed on the illusions of culture. This represents a failure of historical analysis.
We might usefully ask how we got into this mess.

**Culture in the history of study abroad**

At least one explanation derives from the history of study abroad in the twentieth century. This field limped towards maturity in the 1950s at precisely the point when it became suspect and foolhardy to say too much about internationalism, cosmopolitanism, or the politics of transnational relations (unless you were against all of them). In the USA in the 1950s, on university campuses (and elsewhere) it was, simply, a risky business within the parochial and paranoid ethos generated by a McCarthyite distrust of foreign ideas. William Allaway (the founder of the University of California’s Education Abroad Program in 1962) argued that those historical conditions constrained discussions; it was easier and safer to talk about the relatively unchallenging and less troubling question of culture. A politic adjustment to the ethos of McCarthyism became a habit of mind that replaced critical thought.

We need to challenge that orthodoxy. If we demonstrably grapple with the larger questions that have defined and shaped our reality, we may move from the periphery towards the center of academic relevance.

It is, of course, possible to study cultural or anthropological topics abroad. However, intercultural studies are not inevitable in study abroad, nor are they central to the what should be a core focus. It may, in contrast, be argued that inter-cultural studies are, in any case, better carried out in a domestic context where the semiotics are more familiar and more readily understood.

Cultural studies are, at most, a peripheral option in the curriculum of study abroad.

**Culture and difference**

There are other reasons to approach this area critically. At its crudest, culture it offers an inept, archaic mechanism for discussing human behaviour. However that elusive term is defined, it may be a cohesive rather than a divisive factor. It can be argued, for example, that the young share levels of common communication greater than any disconnects resulting from national
difference. They wear the same clothes, listen to the same music and have modes of communication that are curiously ignored in the prevailing discourse.

Jude Mikal recognizes what probably ought to be obvious: “The theories of intercultural adjustment that have dominated research on acculturation stress and culture shock are based on notions of transition that have failed to keep pace with changing media technology.” (J. P. Mikel, 2011, p.17). In short, trans-national social media have eroded the notion that cultural characteristics are necessarily barriers. The complexities of communication between the young are, where and if they exist, linguistic, not cultural. Similarly, trans-national communities created by shared faith, language, class, sexual preference, professions and so on, challenge the emphases on culture as a divisive dynamic in our reality.

The discourse of international education has been rooted in questions of culture. Implicit is the idea that somehow or other the notion offers a grand narrative or global explanation of difference. The inter-cultural and cross cultural-collocation assumes barriers and constraints that students need to be taught to overcome. That is a reactionary, parochial and outmoded perspective in so far as it priorities that which divides humanity over that which we have in common; it fails to recognise the impact of communications which have reduced distance and difference across national boundaries; it seems unconscious of the ways in which the dynamics of globalisation have, for good and/or ill, modified the distinctions between peoples; it conflicts with the ethical implications embedded in cosmopolitanism and internationalism.

**Culture and Morality: If they prick me do I not bleed?**

The perceived benefit of study abroad resides, in part, from the assumption that other countries and their inhabitants are different from the USA. If they were more or less the same, it could be (erroneously) argued that there is little point in encouraging students to travel in pursuit of the new. The environment of study abroad creates a perceived obligation to embed, somehow or
another, an idea of something somewhat unfamiliar in the learning experience. Almost by consensus, that difference has been defined in terms of “culture”.

This is not an ethically neutral emphasis, nor is it inevitable. There are many common aspirations, hopes and fears that transcend national or cultural boundaries. Parents want a better life for their children. We all need shelter, food and water. We all seek care and comfort when we are sick. We all hope for security, and seek love. Shared needs, hopes and aspirations are part of what it means to be human.

In that respect, the cultural preoccupation conflicts with the notion that beneath our ostensible differences there is a common human core, expressed eloquently and painfully by Shylock, the Jew:

    Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs,
dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
to the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as
a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?

    The Merchant of Venice, Act III, Scene I

This resonates with the principle of human rights that encompasses two key ideals: that there is such a thing as the “human family”, and that certain values are universal and, consequently, take precedence over national or cultural practices.

The immediate environment in which we all live challenges those ideals. Norms that are “cultural” are also barbaric. An emphasis on inter-cultural communication has inadvertently embedded respect, tolerance, and appreciation of cultural diversity in the agenda of study abroad, sometimes at the expense of morality and common sense.
In most circumstances, respect for diversity is a well-meant, liberal value that few would dispute. However, at what point does endorsement of difference become a position in which acts of inhumanity are condoned or tolerated? The question exposes a moral and ethical vacuum at the heart of cultural relativism. Shirin Ebadi, Iranian Human Rights Activist, and the first Muslim Woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, argued that “The idea of cultural relativism is nothing but an excuse to violate human rights.”

The practices of the Taliban or ISIS are entirely consistent with some regional and cultural norms that include vicious gender discrimination, medieval concepts of justice, ignorance and intolerance. In these circumstances, we should teach students not to tolerate, but to discriminate intelligently between things: the smart and the stupid, the crass and the clever, the moral, amoral and immoral, the real and the unreal, the humane and the inhumane, the barbaric and the civilized. The lenses of cultural discourse in this context encourage moral myopia.

It is, of course, possible to argue that this represents a form of ethical imperialism. If it does, so be it. Education is not ethically neutral. It prioritizes knowledge over ignorance; encourages rather than punishes debate; values reading books rather than burning them. We need to have the courage and moral intelligence to say that certain values and practices are beyond the boundaries of tolerance. However complex and ambiguous the context may be, that is the responsibility of educators; that is the responsibility of a humane sensibility.

The alternative is moral chaos. The slaughter in Rwanda had a cultural context as did Hitler’s Final Solution. No practitioner in study abroad would consider that these, and other inhumane outrages, ought to be tolerated or respected. That is the most profound, problematic consequence implicit within the ways in which culture is embedded in the discourse of study abroad.

The practices of the Taliban or ISIS are entirely consistent with some regional and cultural norms. The fact that something may be described as “cultural” does not make it less inhuman or barbaric. Uncritical propagation of cultural tolerance is, at those extremes, more than amoral or immoral; it is also stupid – it assumes, for example, that national practices are static realities rather than temporary aberrations or cruelties.

**Conclusion: the myopic leading the blind**
It is, of course, possible to argue for the broadest possible definition of culture: an inclusive idea that encompasses more or less everything that humans do, including politics and religion. In that case the word loses significant meaning and becomes devoid of useful specificity; in meaning everything it signifies nothing. In our context, there is rarely a case in which “culture” serves a useful purpose. It is either reductive and constraining or meaningless in its generality. It functions usefully only in the traditional sense: to signify artistic output and artefact.

The discourse of international education is rooted in questions of “culture”: a grand narrative based on the assumption that differences are more important than commonalities. You may confirm this anecdotally by a brief review of the presentations offered at this conference. That emphasis (that also permeates the literature of study abroad) is politically reactionary and parochial; it conflicts with the ethics of internationalism and cosmopolitanism.

We have an obligation to ask questions that challenge the prevailing orthodoxy. This may also empower us to reclaim the significance of what we teach. I believe in the importance of study abroad. In grappling with the larger questions that define and shape our reality we may move from the periphery towards the centre of academic relevance. In so doing we may move towards parity of esteem with other academic endeavours.

In short, we need to see things differently. The lenses of cultural discourse create myopia and distortion.