

Understanding Europe: Why the “traditional” matters.

Introduction

If we are to argue the validity of study in “traditional” locations, we also need to take a critical look at the arguments for imperative development of opportunities in “non-traditional” locations. Both terms are suspect and the impassioned contrast between these distorts our educational discourse. By traditional we imply that little has changed and that there is continuity between the past and the present. There is no place on earth where there is not some kind of continuity between past and present and there is no place on earth where that continuity has not been fractured.

If we consider the dynamics of urbanisation and globalisation it is clear that those locations customarily designated by the term traditional, Europe in particular, have been transformed radically over the last hundred years or so (as indeed have those places customarily designated as non-traditional). Most of Western Europe is only traditional if the filters of perception are stereotypical projections, clichés of tourism and marketing strategies, and a failure of understanding. Europe can only be defined as traditional in our context in so far as it is, and

persists as, the most popular destination for study abroad students for, I will argue, credible reasons.

When we designate some locations as non-traditional we are not, I assume, implying that these destinations have somehow or another particularly felt the impact of modernity where, as Karl Marx reminds us, “all that is solid melts into air”. What we mean is that fewer students choose to go there and there are also credible reasons for that.

I am not intending to denigrate the idea of studying in any site or sites whether we think them traditional or not. Instead, I will argue that the rationale for study abroad in any place has to be driven by an academic agenda. If we want to be seen as a credible part of the teaching, learning and research community the first priority has to be connection with meaningful and relevant learning objectives.

I will, begin with a brief critique of the enthusiasm for the non-traditional not because of any scepticism about what may be learned in those locations but because, in reality, the demand is more limited; they align less readily with the core learning objectives of US higher education, and because the arguments that are used to endorse this objective are frequently incoherent and based upon misconception and distortion.

I will, then, suggest that the critique of what we call traditional locations is essentially superficial and somewhat befuddled.

Why the idea of non-traditional locations is problematic

The call to expand opportunities for study abroad students in “non-traditional” locations has become a kind of mantra throughout the international education community. This call is almost always allied to the intent significantly to expand numbers going to these places. Of the three key objectives in the Lincoln Commission report, the second was that “efforts be made to expand the number of American students studying in non-traditional countries.” This notion has become a new orthodoxy and there is a widespread, well-intended and passionate commitment towards these perceived ideal objectives.

In outbursts of rhetorical passion and alliterative spittle, some commentators have also ignored the reality that the core of the academic agenda of American higher education is still heavily related to the Western intellectual tradition, not to African or Asian sources, however interesting and valid those may be in some contexts.

In reality, unqualified enthusiasm for an expansion of study abroad in non-traditional locations is neither entirely realistic nor wholly desirable. It is built out of a misplaced and sometimes

condescending enthusiasm for regions and nations constructed through US lenses as an “exotic” other. The whole becomes even more complex and suspect when, as is often the case, non-traditional locations become melded with the developing world. The Lincoln Commission envisaged “an expansion of study abroad programs, especially in developing countries”. The National Security Education Program articulates similar objectives in supporting students who pursue overseas education in “the languages and cultures of world regions that are less-frequently studied” .

There may, of course, be many valid reasons to expand study abroad in non-traditional locations. A significant expansion of minority language study would lead, rationally and reasonably, to the expansion of study abroad in relevant locations. Has that expansion taken place? Is there a marked growth in African Studies in the USA that would stimulate the need to develop more programmes? Does the demand from students in those and related disciplines exceed current supply? The evidence is otherwise.

The objective of non-traditional expansion has also ignored the potential impact that substantial growth would make upon communities with limited capacity to meet the needs of our students. The existence (or otherwise) of a sufficient infrastructure is an obvious factor. US study abroad students are highly demanding consumers of human and physical resources; local students may well feel resentful at the diversion of those towards one privileged national group. Ethical considerations would suggest that restraint in the growth of numbers is a more valid objective than expansion unless US universities are willing to make significant capital investment to build

capacity. Given the fragility of demand and uncertainty of continuity (recent factors include health and political issues), such investment is extremely rare.

What has simulated the demand for growth in these areas and regions is a combination of political agendas, the notion of the attraction of the exotic, and a missionary-like sense that, somehow or another, an American presence is an added value in developing countries. This is study abroad being constructed somewhere between national security agencies, travel companies, and the Mission. If there were a more credible rationale beyond these factors, it would be reflected in a corresponding growth of domestic programmes relevant to non-traditional sites e.g. Development Studies, Asian languages, African Studies, African languages etc. The reality is different: there is no widespread evidence to suggest that the clamour for expansion is driven by increased interest on US campuses in the study of those regions. The example of African Studies or Indian Studies signifies that there has been no major growth of interest in those areas that would suggest that current demand significantly exceeds current supply.

What enthusiasts usually mean by the non-traditional is essentially relatively impoverished locations in the developing world. This ignores the fact that there are also wealthy countries that are non-traditional if the measure is that they attract relatively few US students. Clamour for growth rarely includes, for example, Finland, Sweden, Portugal or Switzerland. The suspicion is that non-traditional contains within it an unspoken assumption that the attraction is the pursuit of encounters with poverty and exotic difference; a cynic might suggest that a subliminal message is “come and see the poor people”.

In too many cases, non-traditionalism is not driven by real academic need; it is driven by an unholy trinity of national political interest, the pursuit of the exotic and a missionary tendency. These emphases weaken the case for the centrality of study abroad as a means of enhancing learning, undermine the inherent seriousness of international education and do a disservice to serious study objectives that can, and are, pursued in non-traditional locations. This constructs study abroad as potentially a form of educational tourism, “a trip”, motivated, at worst, by a kind of voyeurism in which privileged young Americans go to observe relative poverty in a developing country.

Furthermore, what does this new emphasis imply to students who, with probably more academic rationale, choose to study in Western Europe? It sends a signal that their experiences are, to some degree, less valid, less “exciting”. What that does, in essence, is define the validity of experience by location. The emphasis is on place not on what is studied there; the significance of the academic rationale is minimised. As I have noted, there is no significant growth in serious study of non-traditional locations and languages on US campuses. The call for programme growth in non-traditional locations is not based on solid academic grounds but on a shallow pursuit of the exotic.

What is Europe?

It is appropriate that study abroad aligns predominantly with those locations that are most relevant to the curriculum of American institutions. “Curriculum integration” has become a key concept in recent years and, however it is interpreted, it signals an intention to relate what is studied overseas to the academic priorities of home institutions. Given that aspiration, the great cities of Europe offer locations clearly and directly relevant to what is studied in colleges and universities in the United States.

There are, as I have argued, significant problems in the orthodoxy that promotes “non-traditional” over “traditional” locations, that is, broadly, non-European over European; the developing world over more developed countries: The intimacy between the intellectual agendas of American institutions and Western European thought is underestimated; the clamour for non-traditional expansion defines significance through location rather than content; where you study, it suggests, is more important than what you study. In prioritizing place, a quasi- tourist emphasis undermines the serious, academic purposes of our endeavours. The most significant error, however, is that it is based upon a misunderstanding of Europe and fails to recognize the degree to which globalization has transformed the continent, making it a profoundly rich learning environment.

Europe is not just a place; it is a complex idea. The physical borders have been fluid throughout history so that even geography does not offer anything like a static model. In political terms,

Europe is marked by a series of definitions and redefinitions. After World War II, for example, the European Union was constructed to end the cataclysmic conflicts of the first half of the 20th century by creating alliances between traditional enemies. The citation for the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded to the European Union in 2012, recognizes a transformation from “a continent of wars to a continent of peace.” After the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the center of Europe moved eastward. Should Turkey be admitted to the European Union, there will be another redefinition: a reaffirmation of the historical co-existence of Muslim and Christian Europe. Defining Europe is to grapple with the changing face of history.

Furthermore, the great cities of Europe have offered, and still offer, the potential to reconnect with the artistic and literary traditions that have attracted generations of Americans across the Atlantic. They are locations in which history and modernity are juxtaposed in challenging and unexpected ways.

By way of illustration, let us consider Florence, a highly popular destination for American students but one that is likely dismissed by enthusiasts for the non-traditional. It attracts an estimated 45% of all American students studying in Italy. Study-abroad students will encounter the dynamics of contemporary Italy. Florence has, for example, a population of over 4,000 Chinese immigrants, circa 13% of the foreign population of the city, while Prato, just 23 kilometres away, has a population of over 9,000. These figures represent legal immigrants; true figures are at least four times as large; students will observe the political tensions that permeate that fragile nation; they will be confronted by challenges of urbanization in ancient city streets.

They also enter the Renaissance. There is no other location in the world in which a revolution in artistic sensibility so dramatically permeates the environment. Florence is a multi-layered space in which the dynamics of globalization co-exist with evidence of artistic achievements that changed the world.

In London also, students directly encounter dramatic manifestations of globalization. Something like circa 300 languages are spoken by residents of the city; over 30 per cent of the population was born outside of the United Kingdom. The impact of urbanization can be observed in any number of other ways; in the diversity of the population; in the architecture of the city; in a myriad of encounters with evidence of social fluidity. As in many cities in Europe, the development of suburbia, for example, creates spaces that are, in some contexts, pleasant alternatives to the frenetic disorder of city centers and, in others, dumping grounds for the dispossessed.

This gets more complicated when we think more broadly of ways in which the notion of “Europe” is constructed not simply as a series of countries but as a set of concepts. There is nothing simple, static or traditional about the ways in which versions of Europe can interact in the agenda of study abroad. There are, at least, three versions of this space.

Ideas of Europe are embedded in American consciousness and cultural history, which is hardly surprising given the origins of modern America and, in that context, have several manifestations.

The first of these may be exemplified by American expatriates and writers in Paris in the 1920s. Paris offered an alternative to prohibition America which was characterized by the emergence of an industrialized form of capitalism (the Henry Ford syndrome), and the parochialism of Presidents Harding and Coolidge. Paris offered an environment deemed more hospitable to literary endeavors, and a place in which the value of the US dollar permitted a life style more congenial to creative, but impoverished, spirits. One US dollar was worth eight French Francs in 1919. By 1926, the value had increased to thirty-five French Francs. The great cities of Europe have offered, and still offer, the attraction of alternative life styles and diverse values that continues to draw generations of Americans across the Atlantic, including our students. This is an example of historical Europe.

There is, in contrast, the place where I live. This is a Europe in which people work, marry, divorce, argue, vote, die, exercise, and get fat, and go through the myriad of daily annoyances that beset us all. The Northern Line on the London Underground, by way of example, corresponds to what Dante in "The Inferno" characterized as: "the lowest regions and the darkest, and farthest from the heaven which circles all." This is the Europe of nations, countries and places where students study, lose their bus passes, drink too much, and get caught in the rain. It is where we all live. This is Europe now.

There has always been, however, another version of Europe in the American mind. That is not defined by history, politics or the irritations of daily life. It is not made up of separate countries but is a collection of values: a synthesis of High Art and social complexity perceived as

alternative to America. A myriad of authors including Washington Irving, Henry James and Mark Twain have helped define this space as “Europe”: a profoundly rich artistic and historical location that exists across and beyond any specific county. This is more an idea than a location. It is also part of what students seek when they come here. This version of Europe is embedded in the curriculum of study abroad. This is Europe as high art, culture and powerful myth.

Europe is not one static place but a changing and complex mixture of geography, history, politics, myth, art and philosophy. It is both a place and an idea. These versions of Europe coexist in tension with each other and offer the potential to create rich ambiguities for the ways in which students encounter the space both as geography and ideas.

Conclusion

There are, of course, study abroad programs in which participants visit Europe but are not challenged to study seriously the realities of their locations. There are also study programs in non-traditional locations that superficially sustain stereotypes. The “tourist gaze” is not created by where the student studies but by the degree to which the educational agenda disrupts distorted preconceptions. The imperative is to create programs that challenge the idea that Europe is somehow a static location that is less worthy of investigation. The argument that study abroad in non-traditional location is somehow intrinsically and inevitably more rewarding reflects a failure of imagination.

However we define the traditional and the complex space that is Europe, it is clear that it offers an environment rich in potential meaning. In the cities of Europe, students from the United States may learn something about the dynamics that have constructed their reality. They will confront paradox and startling conjunctions. These are not comfortable places to study but multi-layered environments that disrupt expectations and, in that process, create enhanced learning opportunities.

What Dickens observed about London in Little Dorrit persists: a complex space that challenges disturbs and enriches the curious explorer:

“A place of past and present, mystery, romance, abundance, want, beauty, ugliness, fair country gardens, and foul street gutters, all confused together.”

Within that confusion is a landscape that resonates with credible academic objectives for students motivated by a curiosity to analyse and explore the unfamiliar. To designate these paradoxical places as “traditional” and, therefore, less of an educational priority is, simply, a failure of insight and imagination.

NOTES

Sources

1. According to a report released by the municipality of Florence, in 2004 the city had 3,918 Chinese residents, representing over 13 percent of the total foreign population residing in the city.

The city of Prato (23 kilometers from Florence) has the second largest Chinese immigrant population in Italy (after Milan with Italy's largest Chinatown). Legal Chinese residents in Prato on 31 December 2008 were 9, 927. [1] Local authorities estimate the number of Chinese citizens living in Prato to be around 45,000, illegal immigrants included. [2]

"Prato in cifre: gli stranieri residenti a Prato - suddivisione per cittadinanza" (in (Italian)).

Comune.prato.it. 2008-12-31. Retrieved 2011-04-05.

Jump up ^ "Notizie, informazioni della regione Toscana". Intoscana.it. Retrieved 2011-04-05.

2. Past attempts to gauge student numbers in Italy have suggested that 43% of the students go to Florence (AACUPI, 2008).

3. London's diversity can also be seen in statistics for London residents' country of birth. Of the 7.17 million people living in London at the time of the 2001 census, only 5.23 million had actually been born in the United Kingdom. The remaining two million people were born outside the UK

<http://worldpopulationreview.com/>

4. Census 2013 summary:

More than a third of Londoners were born outside the UK.

Appendix A: Geographic Classification of Languages

Welsh/Cymraeg European

Gaelic (Irish) European

Gaelic (Scottish) European

Manx Gaelic European

Gaelic (Not otherwise specified) European

Cornish European

Scots European

Gypsy/Traveller languages European

French European

Portuguese European

Spanish European

Italian European

German European

Polish European

Slovak European

Czech European

Romanian European

Lithuanian European

Latvian European

Hungarian European

Bulgarian European

Greek European

Dutch European

Swedish European

Danish European

Finnish European

Estonian European

Slovenian European

Maltese European

Any other European Language (EU) European

Albanian European

Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian European

Ukrainian European

Any other Eastern European Language (non EU) European

Northern European Language (non EU) European

Romani language (any) European

Yiddish European

Russian European

Turkish Middle-Eastern

Arabic Middle-Eastern

Hebrew West/Central Asian

Kurdish West/Central Asian

Persian/Farsi West/Central Asian

Pashto West/Central Asian

West/Central Asian Language (all other) West/Central Asian

Urdu South Asian

Hindi South Asian

Panjabi South Asian

Pakistani Pahari (with Mirpuri and Potwari) South Asian

Bengali (with Sylheti and Chatgaya) South Asian

Gujarati South Asian

Marathi South Asian

Telugu South Asian

Tamil South Asian

Malayalam South Asian

Sinhala South Asian

Nepalese South Asian

South Asian Language (all other) South Asian

Mandarin Chinese East Asian

Cantonese Chinese East Asian

All other Chinese East Asian

Japanese East Asian

Korean East Asian

Vietnamese East Asian

Thai East Asian

Malay East Asian

Tagalog/Filipino East Asian

East Asian Language (all other) East Asian

Oceanic/Australian language (any) Other

North/South American language (any) Other

Caribbean Creole (English-based) Other

Caribbean Creole (all other) Other

Amharic African

Tigrinya African

Somali African

Krio African

Akan African

Yoruba African

Igbo African

Swahili/Kiswahili African

Luganda African

Lingala African

Shona African

Afrikaans African

Any other Nigerian language African

West African language (all other) African

African language (all other) African

All other languages Other

British sign language Other

Sign Language (all other) Other

Any Sign Communication System Other

5.London Councils Report

London has the largest number of community languages spoken in Europe. Over 300 languages are spoken in London schools with Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, Cantonese and Mandarin most common. [39]

<http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/londonfacts/default.htm?category=2>