

## Book Review

Michael R. Laubscher's *Encounters with Difference: Student Perceptions of the Role of Out-of-Class Experiences in Education Abroad*.

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THIS VOLUME focuses on the overseas study experience of U.S. students with exclusive attention to what occurs outside the walls of the class-room. The author challenges international educators to look at this very substantial part of the study abroad experience and how they can assist students to make better use of this learning opportunity. Laubscher cites a common response of returned study abroad students when asked if the experience was worthwhile. Frequently, the response is glowing; students describe the study abroad as having had a profound effect, how it changed their view of the world and how it frequently changes students' plans about how to navigate through their futures. Yet students' struggles to explain what exactly they learned or which specific incidents made the greatest impact. Social scientists are generally uncomfortable with this anecdotal methodology to bolster support for international education. Studies that have been done on this topic often contain flaws in design or methodology, and results have been mixed as to the impact that study abroad has on students.

The author presents statistics that demonstrate a continued growth in the number of study abroad programs being implemented, and increases in the number of participants who go overseas each year. Furthermore, the future for this area looks promising since several reports call for increases in the number of U.S. students who should study abroad in the future (see, for example, *Educating for Global Competence, A National Mandate for Education Abroad. Getting on with the Task*). This is an interesting situation since we do not have conclusive empirical data as to whether significant change occurs as the result of study abroad.

This author does not take on the challenge of how to provide empirical support for study abroad; rather, he offers several theoretical

frameworks from which the students themselves can make better sense out of what happens to them when they go overseas to study, and how they can be more systematic in the learning process that can occur overseas, specifically beyond the walls of the university classroom. The book is a thoughtful analysis of how to categorize, organize, and exploit this type of out-of-class, cross-cultural experience. For those of us who had study abroad experiences with little or no previous experience overseas, this book has a special appeal. For, indeed, it takes several months to figure out what are the priorities, and in what situations one can learn the most. It is not unusual to hear returned study abroad students speak of knowing how they would have prioritized, and managed their time differently, if they were to have a second chance to study abroad. Indeed, it is not unusual for students to return to a study abroad site as part of a graduate experience so that they can "do it right." Laubscher offers international educators a framework to assist study abroad students in getting the most out of the overseas experience on the first try. His book presents the reader with several theories to guide this process, including Milton Bennett's Developmental Model for Acquiring Intercultural Sensitivity, James Spradley's Learning Stages in the Enculturation Process, Jacquetta Burnett's Ethnographic Discovery Model on Cross-Cultural Learning, and David Kolb's Experiential Learning Model. A disadvantage of Laubscher's work is that it is not in the book's scope to present fully all of these theoretical perspectives. However, the bibliography provides the next steps for those international educators who want to implement a comprehensive predeparture program for their students.

Laubscher presents, in each of three chapters, different aspects of the nonacademic lives of the study abroad student, that is, three areas that are ripe for learning experientially. Yet for the novice sojourner, it may not be possible to take full advantage of these learning opportunities without some preparation. The first of the three areas is participant observation, which calls for the student to develop an ethnographer's understanding of how to be an observer and a participant in the culture simultaneously. In a sense, a well-prepared study abroad student needs to be aware of the content and the process of the overseas experience. For example, the student of Spanish culture must have an understanding of the traditional and historic values of

that culture (content) as well as understanding of how that reality impacts on his or her daily interpersonal relations and how he or she responds to the reality of being a U.S. student in modern day Spain (process).

A second area is personal interaction. This area is particularly important if a goal of the experience is to develop conversational ability in the host culture language and to understand the host country psychology. Laubscher offers numerous examples of successes and failures in this area by the thirty students he interviewed for this study. Where students were successful in developing close relationships with host nationals, there was a better chance for real learning to occur. In such cases, the U.S. students got beyond their stereotypes of nationalities and were able to understand Palestinians as victims in a political conflict. Another student realized that her French roommates were individuals from very different social backgrounds. Kenyans came to be understood in terms of their different tribal roots. Laubscher uses Spradley's idea that human beings generally interpret new data in terms of past experience unless there is a decisive intervention in this interpretive process. This is what happens when students have in-depth contact with host nationals and are encouraged to be reflective about this interchange. The third area is travel, and it plays a considerably smaller role in learning. This is because the student is generally too transient and, when traveling, a tourist role is taken up rather than a student role. Travel achieves only the most superficial level of learning as described in Spradley's writing-learning about a culture, rather than deeper levels of learning: understanding, believing, using, and internalizing information about a new culture. Travel can, however, provide information about how a country or culture fits into a regional context. In summary, these three areas can provide important means of learning about cultural difference. Laubscher also states that students generally fail in their goal of wanting to become an integral part of the environment overseas, but this is an unrealistic expectation for a student spending a year abroad. Again, inter-national educators need to help students develop realistic goals during their predeparture phase. The pivotal issue of this tome is to encourage the inter-national educator to take steps to train students to develop observational and analytical skills so that they can better process the experiences they

have outside of the classroom. This is basically an approach that will teach them to be independent learners.

Laubscher offers a chapter of recommendations for implementing pro-program changes that will enhance the out-of-classroom learning experience. He specifically cites the importance of integrating a course during the predeparture semester as a first link in a chain of learning experiences. Along with the overseas sojourn, a seminar would provide a retrospective on what had been learned overseas. This capstone seminar would require, as its culmination, a final paper on the overall effect of the overseas experience. In this design, the overseas experience becomes truly integrated into the student's overall learning and makes the study abroad experience more fruitful.

In summary, this book provides an action plan for making overseas experiences more educationally meaningful. It does this through a solid and extensive use of theory, and reports on thirty students who participated in Pennsylvania State University's education abroad programs in eight countries during 1990. The bibliography is also quite extensive and offers selections from learning and cross-cultural theory, and studies of overseas programs. Although the book is not targeted toward students considering an overseas experience and their parents, it does offer worthwhile information on what can be expected of the study abroad experience and how to select an appropriate overseas program.