Breaking Down Walls, Building Cross-Cultural Relationships

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Recommended Citation

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Cover Page Footnote
I give my great appreciation and thanks to my family, especially my parents, who push me to be better every day.

This critical reflection on engagement is available in VA Engage Journal: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/vaej/vol4/iss1/4
Breaking Down Walls, Building Cross-Cultural Relationships

The decision to study abroad in a distant and foreign place is an excellent decision that many college students fail to realize. In the U.S only about 9% of undergraduate students study abroad before they graduate. And among those that study abroad, about 60% of students are abroad for eight weeks or less. Nevertheless, in the 2012/2013 academic year over 289,000 American students studied abroad which was a record high (“A Quick Look,” 2014). Once abroad, however, it is imperative to challenge yourself and jump out of your comfort zone. You can do this by interning or volunteering, and the benefits reaped will carry you through your early career and beyond. My strong recommendation to study abroad and become immersed on a deeper level is backed by an experience that has tested my limits and broadened my mind.

I had the privilege of volunteering at a non-profit food aid NGO in Amman, Jordan named Tkiyet Um Ali (TUA), an organization that lives by the slogan, “Food for Life”. It was conceptualized by Queen Alia al-Hussein and instituted by Princess Haya bint al-Hussein with the mission, “to feed and sustain underprivileged citizens all year long through the provision of ‘Food for Life’ while guiding them towards long term self-sustaining solutions, for an empowered and dignified existence.” (“Mission, Vision,” 2015). Its work does much more than words can describe and my volunteer involvement with TUA improved my capacity to break down barriers of communication and strengthen my relationship with people from a different culture. The lens through which I saw the world was enlarged, enabling me to recognize and confront stereotypes that are too often formed out of ignorance. You will not learn about another country’s people by reading a book or watching National Geographic. You must go all the way down to the personal level of one-on-one interaction in order to uncover deeply buried truths of society. Cultures are like icebergs in which you can observe a small fragment of the ice, but the
real substance is hidden from the eye’s view underneath the water. The moment you discover what lies below, your mind absorbs knowledge that can never be diminished.

At TUA I participated in the daily exercise of feeding over 350 people at lunch time. I was able to utilize the colloquial Arabic I was learning and help others in a very touching way. The knowledge I gained about the operations of NGO’s in an Arab country was important. But the lessons I learned from the people I met was invaluable. I remember one specific time when I learned the story of a young volunteer whom I had been working with for a few months. This boy had always caught my eye due to the extraordinary work ethic he displayed at such a young age. Because I was curious I asked him where he was from and why he volunteered at TUA. His response hit me like a steam locomotive. He had fled Syria with his family during the catastrophic and ongoing civil war seeking a better life in Jordan. He did not attend school but he volunteered as a way to stay out of trouble and meet new people. His family could have used all the money it could get a hold of, yet the young boy volunteered five hours a day, five days a week, and always had a smile on his face. The reason I say studying abroad is not enough is because I learned much more about Jordanian and Arab culture through my volunteer work. What is visualized by the eye is only a small percentage of what constitutes a culture. Through interpersonal communication, like I had with this young boy, you gain an understanding of the nuances and unique details of the cultural atmosphere constructed by individuals. Culture is the collective set of beliefs and values of individuals in a given region. Without knowledge of the given parts, you cannot understand the whole.

In my future professional career I will be better positioned to resolve tensions that arise from cultural differences. By working through problems and issues at my volunteer location, I developed an ability to solve problems in a complex environment. When I did not perform a task
correctly, other volunteers or my boss would attempt to communicate this with me. Sometimes, due to the language gap or their different methods of going about alerting me, I would not completely comprehend my mistakes. We would target the problem and I would discover my mishap through trial and error and a calm composure. It was imperative I did not get easily frustrated simply because it was someone from a different background and culture that was correcting me.

Language, communication, and cultural barriers are not exclusive to careers in the military, foreign service, national security, or intelligence fields. You may face these same realities in any profession or daily task. The people who are capable of resolving cultural misunderstandings, issues that can sometimes be quite contentious, are more likely to climb the ladder of success. Person-to-person communication skills are an essential characteristic for anyone that has a vision to become the best at what they do. In time, a growing sense of diversity becomes a natural benefit for working with people who may talk, eat, and dress differently. Interactions with people who have dissimilar customs, traditions, and perspectives of the world may not always result in pleasant, agreeable discussions; however, a respect for each other’s background goes a long way in resolving issues that would otherwise become intensified by ignorance.

Before landing in Jordan, never before had I seen what looked like a city that fell from the sky on an inescapable horizon of orange desert. How can people enjoy living here, I asked myself. Yet in the coming months, I uncovered the answer to my question. To Jordanians, this is a place on earth they hold dear to their hearts. Having the ability to accurately point out distinctions overcomes misperceptions, allowing you to gain respect for people of different origins. While living with my host family, they never complained about their lack of hot water.
Taking showers and baths or doing the dishes would mostly be done with cold water. For me it was a change I needed to adapt to. It would be difficult for many Americans to handle a situation like this, let alone issues we experience in the U.S like minor power outages. The misperception is that Jordanians live in third world conditions and do so by choice. However, by identifying the difference between the material life we live in America and a much simpler life lived in Jordan, we realize that Jordan is not a third world country nor do its people lack productivity. Jordanians don’t have the same amount of resources available to them as we do in the United States. Jordan is a frontier state, meaning its productive capacity is limited to borrowing resources and aid from other states. It does not have oil to provide Western nations, but relies on tourism and foreign investment for the majority of its growth. Despite all this, Jordanians are not unproductive people. They do not lack the knowledge and education necessary to progress in our interconnected world. What they lack in resources, they have in human potential. By identifying this distinction we gain a greater respect for the lifestyle of Jordanians, even if it is one very different from our own.

In addition to serving food, I was fortunate enough to tag along on some field visits when a group of us would visit the homes of families to assess their eligibility for monthly food parcels. TUA feeds over 18,000 families across Jordan every day by sending monthly food packages to families that do not have the means to buy enough food to survive. Our visits allowed us to evaluate a family’s financial situation and living conditions to determine their need for food aid. The experience was eye opening and it reminded me that there are good people in every corner of the globe regardless of the culture they live in. Just imagine allowing foreign strangers to enter your home without any prior warning. These Jordanian families not only did this, but also offered me food and tea, essential resources that they significantly lacked. I was
mesmerized by the happiness and humbleness of family members despite their home being as small as one room, sometimes without a refrigerator or electricity. While they desired just to live another day, I was there intensely listening and observing their actions and words to make sense of it all. This is not an experience I could have hoped for just by studying abroad. Because I was volunteering at TUA, I was offered opportunities of substantial value. Although I resided in the home of a host family while in Amman, I was subject to learning about a single household. Because of TUA, I was able to experience an entirely new living atmosphere; an atmosphere unbeknownst to those that only drive by these poorer villages. Why did this experience mean anything to someone who can go back home to a full plate of food and the best shows on T.V.? It mattered because without deep understanding of something or someone different, the world is absent of compassion and respect. And without these two traits, an increasingly interconnected world will remain divisive, which is a blemish on the intended goal of globalization to improve the standard of living of all people regardless of location or origin. I hope this rather short, yet impactful experience will be shared by all students who desire to leave a positive mark on the world. A globe of fostered understanding will reduce conflict and restore humanity’s purpose to improve through the expanding growth of tolerance.

The experience I had in Jordan can never be taken away. But there were some limitations to the knowledge I learned, experiences I absorbed, and cultural characteristics I understood. Most limiting was the short period of time I spent in the country. I was there for a whole semester, about four months. This was not enough time to travel the country in its entirety nor was it sufficient to learn the “ins and outs” of the capital, Amman. There were multiple cities like Irbid and Zarqa that I did not step a foot in, yet these places add to the complex picture of Jordanian history and culture. I was also enrolled in sixteen credit hours of courses during my
study abroad. If it were not for these classes I would have had many more weekends to travel to places like the Red Sea or eastern Jordan. Another limiting factor was the language barrier. I came to Jordan with a beginner level speaking proficiency which substantially inhibited my ability to ask intelligent questions to Jordanians who only spoke Arabic. Although I learned a lot about Arabic culture through language, it placed a barrier in the way of my capability to access crucial information about the culture. It was simpler to ask my host family about particular customs and traditions they perform, but they only represent one family out of many in Jordan. Studying abroad is a pathway to knowledge that should not be overlooked. The desire to learn everything about a given culture, however, is a fool’s errand that will only result in disappointment for those that set their expectations too high.

Unfortunately some perceive study abroad experiences in places like Africa and the Middle East as opportunities for privileged Americans to assert their power and superiority over the “lesser” cultures of the uncivilized. They believe Americans and Europeans go to impoverished places and take pictures with the disenchanted as “enactments of colonialism and violence…” (Lesnick, 2012). Although unintentional or possibly just naïve, Americans that tout their interactions with these people are embodying a new form of cultural condescension. These arguments are objectionable and utterly false in the large majority of undergraduate study abroad experiences. Speaking from the perspective of my own experience in Jordan, I developed a respect for the people I met that has inspired me to assist those with less and be open-minded about the traditions alien to the traditions we practice as Americans. In no way was I attempting to force my culture on Jordanians; conversely, it was Jordanians that were making it possible for me to develop a broader cultural understanding. Not only do I better understand Arab culture, but I have learned to love it and pursue further study of its intricacies. Of course there are some
young Americans that post pictures on Facebook and Twitter while abroad that include shameful comments, but the very large majority of study abroad students return to America with a greater appreciation for the word around them. This was certainly the case for me.

Finally, is studying abroad worth the effort, time, and money it entails? From what I have said previously, the benefits outweigh the costs. But what are the costs of studying abroad? Curtis Chin, a former U.S ambassador to the Asian Development Bank thinks universities place too much emphasis on study abroad programs and too little on teacher accountability and good parenting. He argues that you do not need to go abroad to learn the same material you can learn while at your university. He even says some students go abroad and learn absolutely nothing (Chin, 2013). This is where he has no merit to his argument. He assumes that students who go abroad just to drink, party, or travel a country as a tourist do not learn anything. Even if a student did go abroad to do these things, that student will still become more confident and more responsible because they were removed from an environment where they feel comfortable, which is home. Mr. Curtis also assumes that these activities aren’t already being done while the same students are at college in America. It is not only the students that are motivated and focused that benefit from studying abroad, but also the students that simply desire to live a different lifestyle for a semester. This argument is surprising coming from someone who has traveled the world as a U.S ambassador. He says, “But the value of experience comes down to motivation, attitude and a given program’s quality” (Chin, 2013) This may be true, but it is usually experiences like traveling through the natural sites of another country or meeting that country’s people that motivate and inspire students to pursue bigger and better things. How can a semester at a student’s home institution be more motivating than one in the center of the Middle East, or along the Mediterranean ocean, or near the Vatican? When I read about Moses looking down at
the promised land of Judea and Samaria at the end of the Exodus, it bears nothing in comparison to my experience actually climbing Mount Nebo in Jordan, looking down upon Jerusalem and seeing what Moses saw. You cannot understand that feeling by reading a book or by listening to a professor’s lecture, despite how excellent the professor may be. More students should be encouraged to study abroad even if it is costlier and even if the students are being taught by professors from another country. And to debunk a repeated myth, studying abroad is usually more cost effective than private and public universities in America (Grant, 2014). You can have the experience of a lifetime and save money. Who doesn’t want that?

What the ambassador also neglects is opportunities to work, intern, or volunteer while abroad. Removed from ones native language, customs, and culture, a student’s learning experience is profoundly valuable. The challenges of operating in any new work environment cultivates work ethic, but doing it in another country molds awareness and tolerance. Failing may become commonplace, yet we learn more from our failures than we do our successes. A student should not go abroad unless prepared to adapt to shortcomings and false expectations. That is the purpose of a study abroad experience. It is to throw a country at you to see if you dodge or catch. It is my hope you notice the value in owning your study abroad experience to make it as unique and challenging as you can.

Studying abroad was my second best decision behind choosing to volunteer in a foreign country. The four months I spent in Jordan traveling to prominent places like the Dead Sea, Wadi Rum, and Petra bore nothing in comparison to my interactions with Jordanians. As I left I felt like I was able to understand, on a much deeper level, a community of people that call Jordan their home. I feel as if I am better prepared to tackle the future obstacles we will all encounter after graduating from college. My takeaway from my time in Jordan, specifically as a result of
my volunteering effort at Tkiyet Um Ali, is that strength is found in diversity, and if diverse people are able to understand and respect each other, there are no bounds to our capabilities as humans in a world which we share.
References


