In Study Abroad, Simple Is Sophisticated

By Wendy Williamson

When I was 23 years old and working for the Peace Corps in Africa, I lived in a mud hut with no running water, no electricity, and virtually no technology or modern-day conveniences. I collected rainwater in containers, bathed in a bucket, and used a latrine outside. I lived with cockroaches, tarantulas, snakes, and other critters. But my life was simple. Today I cannot live without my BlackBerry, every minute of every day is scheduled, and my life is complex.

The difference between my life today and my Africa experience brings to mind the quote from Leonardo da Vinci: "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

My field, study abroad, is far from simple, and if you follow the buzz, you probably know how "unsophisticated" it can be. A recent study at the University of Washington, published in the journal Psychology of Addictive Behaviors, found that many American students double their alcohol consumption while studying abroad in Europe, Australia, or New Zealand. Study abroad has long been associated with partying and, as a recent article in The Chronicle put it, "a perk for wealthy students at selective colleges."

This is disappointing because many of us who work with college students, or send them to other countries to study, have higher aspirations for their international experience than drinking more alcohol or backpacking around Europe. We see study abroad as education, not vacation, and we honestly believe that the study-abroad experience has the potential to change lives, and the world, for the better.

There are two ways in which we can approach education: linear and circular.

Linear education is the traditional approach. It treats the teacher as the giver of knowledge and the student as the receiver. Knowledge is static, passed in one direction, and is one-dimensional.

Circular education takes a systems approach. Education is an interrelational, experiential process to engage with rather than follow. Knowledge is dynamic, passed in various directions, and is multidimensional.

Sophisticated study abroad is more than going to college in another country; it's a shift from linear to circular education.

Instead of asking, "How can we educate international students?," those of us who work with college students ask, "How can we foster international education?" Instead of asking, "What courses and activities can benefit international students and their education?," we ask, "How can we create an atmosphere where local people, culture, art, and the environment are the classroom?" Instead of asking, "How can we integrate
international students with locals, businesses, and the community?," we ask, "How can we facilitate communication among them?"

Leonardo was right. Simplicity doesn't mean less or fewer; it means more or greater. What seems complicated and even unrelated becomes something new. For example, we don't typically see six carbon atoms, 12 hydrogen atoms, and six oxygen atoms separately after they have combined. We taste sugar, simple and sophisticated. Think of a well-made crème brûlée.

The chemistry of study abroad isn't so different. The problem is that the approach toward education is usually linear. It doesn't put people and cultures together, it just sends students in. We have seen education as something to give to students, not as something they experience, give, and get. Molecules are constantly changing and rearranging their atoms in chemical reactions to form new molecules and compounds. People and cultures mimic this process.

And that brings me back to my time with tarantulas. Although many students choose traditional, touristic places to study abroad, small communities, like my village in Cameroon, make good laboratories to approach circular education.

Small communities allow for better interpersonal communication. There is a greater opportunity for people-to-people and culture-to-culture bonds. Because they are small, and people are generally more open and unaffected by tourism, there are more interactions of a useful kind. In my Cameroonian village, locals welcomed my presence and invited me to participate in family meals, community groups, school activities, Christian church services, Ramadan, and various other celebrations, ceremonies, and festivals. I became a member of the community and a friend to many who frequently visited and talked with me in my home. I played with children, held many babies, even carried some of them on my back.

The "chemistry" is right because education is not so segregated and isolated. Students are not only learners, they are teachers as well. Locals are not passive; they are active and engaged in the learning process. Knowledge informs, but it also is transformed into something new. In Cameroon I learned that a traditional healer can cast out evil spirits that cause malaria, papaya seeds can cure parasitical infections, everything (even garbage) can be put to good use, and grilled fish bones are healthy and tasty. In turn, my community learned some karate and how a nassara (white woman in the Fulfulde language) can kick. They also learned how to prevent parasites, malaria, and HIV/AIDS.

And the life-changing potential in small communities is different from that in large or tourist-heavy cities. Traditional economic development focuses on export industries without regard to local preferences. It calls for services and amenities to attract tourism, which brings money. But people-centered economic development involves local preferences, consumption, and spending first. After I made banana bread for a group of women, they modified the recipe, African-style, and started selling it in the local market. We formed a United Women's Group, which included members who spoke three languages and belonged to various religious backgrounds, to foster better community and economic development.
Sophisticated study abroad is people-centered and socially responsible. Instead of allowing the economy to chip away at local culture, it cultivates the economy around culture, preserving that culture in the process. Because economic development is centered on locals instead of tourism, it transfers power from large corporations to people who value people. In doing so, it can create a better, more sustainable world.

To make this work, we need to organize more encounters than activities. Putting people in a room together to have an animated discussion about what is needed in a community is different from leading them all to paint a school that someone else decided should be painted.

When study abroad balances global viewpoints with community and education, locals and students are empowered, positive development is encouraged, and the possibilities are endless. Students, and the world, are ready for a simpler and more sophisticated approach.

*Wendy Williamson is director of study abroad at Eastern Illinois University, author of Study Abroad 101 (Agapy, 2008), and a co-founder of Facultyled.com and AbroadScout.com, which provide information about study abroad.*