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Travel Courses in Africa: The Small Liberal Arts College Experience

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Part I: Designing Courses for Study in Africa

Introduction

My colleague and I are now getting ready for our third trip with Roanoke College students for study abroad in Africa. Roanoke College enrolls less than 2,000 co-eds, enjoys a vigorous liberal arts curriculum, and honors its historical Lutheran affiliation. For years, Roanoke students have had the option of travel study during what we call the May Term. Typically, intensive study abroad during the May Term entails three weeks, starting the first weekend of May, a day or two after our graduation ceremonies, and ending the last week of the month.

Not atypical in the case of small, liberal arts colleges, resource support for study in Africa--including itinerary logistics, and financial and curriculum planning--is not readily available. One can make a valid argument that a far greater level of resourcefulness is required of faculty at small, private institutions of higher learning than at large universities with broader supporting infrastructures for travel abroad. The logistics involved in travel study in developing countries, especially as compared for example to travel in Western Europe, compound the difficulties.

The biggest curriculum design challenge for our intensive learning courses in African countries is how to fit in necessary background reading, appropriate writing assignments, and class sessions so that our students can derive the richest kind of experience while traveling. We want our students to see as much of the African landscape and interact with as many Africans as is feasible within our three-week time frame. The first courses my colleague and I offered together on a trip to Tanzania in 1994 are part of the standard Roanoke College curriculum. We carefully modified them for travel study. The courses, Sociology 102: Anthropology and Political Science 224: Comparative Political Systems - Africa, lend themselves well to study abroad. First we shall explain in detail how the Anthropology course was designed for Tanzania, then the Political Science course to illustrate how another standard course can be modified for study in Africa. The final portion of Part I of the paper

will look briefly at two intensive learning courses we have designed and will take abroad on a May trip to Ethiopia and Kenya in the year 2000.

Tanzania - Anthropology.

Teaching Anthropology abroad works extremely well because it is a uniquely cross-cultural discipline. For starters, living on a day-to-day basis in a society other than one's own vividly illustrates the pivotal concept in Anthropology, cultural relativism: understanding a culture within its own context. Tanzania provides a "natural" laboratory for students of Anthropology for a variety of reasons: 1) students can derive a genuine appreciation of the cultural patterns of a society other than their own, 2) they can better understand the relationship between the physical environment in Tanzania and the culture, 3) they can be exposed not only to modern, urbanized Tanzanian society, but to the more traditional indigenous lifestyles, such as that of the Maasai pastoralists, as well, and 4) they have the opportunity to explore firsthand a world famous archaeological site, Olduvai Gorge.

Of course one prefers to take full advantage of the site(s) in travel abroad studies. To that end, both reading and writing assignments for the Anthropology course were designed to minimize formal classroom study and to maximize the students' "real life" experience. So before leaving for Africa, Anthropology students were assigned the reading of a standard Anthropology text. In addition I located and provided readings specifically on Tanzania, including *Background Notes* on Tanzania from the U.S. State Department and articles on Olduvai Gorge, the Maasai, current events in Tanzania, and the history of Tanzania. When we held class meetings during our travels, typically in the mornings for two or three hours, four or five times a week in the professor's hotel room (or whenever and wherever feasible), the readings could be referred to and integrated into class discussion about anthropological principles and application to our current Tanzanian experiences.

Designed according to the same learning goals, writing assignments were of two kinds. The first required students to keep a daily journal in which they recorded their impressions of the life/culture in Tanzania and/or reactions to what they observed. At the same time, the journal entries were to illustrate anthropological concepts learned from the course; i.e., journal entries were to reflect that the student was able to make connections between what was learned through texts and class discussions to field study experience in Tanzania. In recognition of time constraints, the second writing assignment allowed the students to "think anthropologically" while keeping ties with the folks back home. The first two weeks in Tanzania, each student wrote two short incident papers, focusing on a salient or meaningful cultural incident that the student either witnessed or experienced personally during her stay. After being read by the instructor (but not marked on), these two papers could be used by the students as letters to mail to someone in the U.S.

As part of our study in Tanzania, a three-day safari at Ngorongoro Crater offered the students a treat they did not want to miss in Africa: seeing the big game. (*We include at least a two-day safari whenever possible on every trip to Africa because of the reasons stated in this paragraph.*) The safari not only accorded the thrill of a real, live viewing of elephants, zebras, giraffes, hippos, and the like; it also provided a dynamic focal point through which the relationship between the physical environment in Tanzania and the culture could be explored. What made the safari especially poignant for learning about the environmental context was our visit to a traditional Maasai village located within the Ngorongoro Conservation Area.

Of the whole trip perhaps the most profound learning experience, which beautifully integrated environment and culture for the Anthropology students, was participating in a Habitat for Humanity Project in Nkinga, a lovely village in Tanzania's hinterland. Arrangements for the project were made with the help of our campus Habitat affiliation headed up by the Chaplain's Office, and through Habitat for Humanity International, with a branch in Tanzania. The most practical and exciting means of reaching Nkinga is by tiny propeller plane, flying low over lush tropical terrain, cockpit manned with international pilots serving in Missionaries in Aviation. After an ebullient, warm welcome by the community, students settled into a quite clean, two-room guest house, replete with mosquito-netted bunks, archaic toilette facilities out back, and an open fire over which meals were cooked. For a full week students made (with rudimentary supplies) bricks, cement blocks and roof tiles. At the same time they learned first hand a little about what human portage entails, as they hauled the bricks and tiles on their heads back and forth for miles to home construction sites. Another important anthropological lesson centered around indigenous work: utilization of local building materials, labor organization, and work values. In sum,

students worked, lived, and/or recreated with families, local Habitat officials, village government dignitaries, church members, children, hospital personnel, etc. With no big city distractions, students were immersed in the life of the indigenous community, even getting to attend a large, spirited, combination traditional and western, Christian wedding ceremony at the village church.

Following the Habitat project, a 26-hour train ride from Nkinga to Dar es Salaam was an integral part of the overall design of the Anthropology course, providing students opportunity for another profound cultural experience. The train ride itself was a cultural encounter. While the overnight accommodations were certainly adequate, students gleaned a great deal regarding services for poor passengers, toilet facilities, meals, and security measures from this mode of travel in a developing country. Students also learned that the train ride offered a transitional space and time between *Gemeinschaft*, "a type of society in which social bonds are based on informality and close personal ties of friendship and kinship", and *Gesellschaft*, "a type of society in which social relationships are formal, contractual, expedient, impersonal, and specialized" (Theodorson and Theodorson)[2]. Via rail, after having stayed in the remote village of Nkinga, students were transported into a different social universe, that of a huge metropolitan area, Dar es Salaam. Adjusting to the contrast dramatically illustrated for students the concept of "culture shock". From living in austere, rural simplicity, students went to living in relatively affluent, urban complexity. In Dar es Salaam, the group stayed in a downtown hotel with air-conditioning and flush toilets, rode in cabs amid the city traffic, walked on a posh beach, bartered with the salespeople in the various and sundry markets and shops, ate in nice restaurants and on a couple of evenings, gambled in a casino and danced in a club. The cultural anthropology lesson was lost on no one.

Tanzania - Political Science

As is the case with Anthropology, a standard Political Science course can be modified to work well within an intensive study abroad framework. Tanzania is a good case for the study of politics in Africa. Tanzania is one of the most stable countries on the continent and one that had been most committed to socialism. Tanzania has a non-European lingua franca (Kiswahili) and a relatively high literacy rate. Furthermore, Tanzania has not suffered from the deep ethnic cleavages that have been the source of most conflicts in Africa. We designed the course so that students could learn why this country was an aberration from the rest. We visited and interviewed a number of government officials including the current President, Benjamin W. Mkapa, who was then Secretary of Higher Education and Technology. We explored the significance of a common language of the politics of a country. Our interviews with the ordinary citizens revealed a deep sense of patriotism and unity among them, albeit with some grievances between mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar. When we got to Zanzibar (via Russian-built hydrofoil, a holdover from Cold War political relationships) we were fascinated by the distinct Arab/Swahili/Moslem culture. Our objective was to gauge in a very modest way the differences in political culture between Zanzibar and the mainland. Indeed there was a sense that the Zanzibaris felt unique and apart from the mainlanders. So we assessed the prospects for a future **United Republic of Tanzania**. Overall however, we were able to do some analysis and to arrive at some tentative generalizations that could be applied to other countries in Africa, particularly those for whom unity, stability and patriotism have been elusive. Clearly, the case study method can be effectively used in study abroad programs; in fact, it may be the most effective method.

Ethiopia and Kenya - History and Political Science

As part of innovative curriculum development, Roanoke College faculty are in the process of submitting, and upon approval from our Curriculum Committee of implementing, courses specifically designed to be offered during a short period such as our May Term and which are designated under a new rubric, Intensive Learning (IL). My colleague and I have designed such a course and are offering it for the first time as a travel course in May Term 2000. Our course is entitled **AFRICAN FACES AND VOICES**. It is broadly designed to immerse the student in an intensive learning experience, encompassing either the history, political traditions, literature or other cultural facets, of specific regions and/or peoples in Africa. For general orientation, students will first be required to do background reading on a specific location and peoples. Overall, however, emphasis will be placed on seeking out indigenous African sources of information. In other words, students will be encouraged to develop a more Afrocentric than Eurocentric perspective in this course.

For May Term 2000, my colleague and I will offer, respectively, IL 277A: African Faces and Voices - Oral History and IL 277B: African Faces and Voices - Political Science. On this trip, we shall stay mainly in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia and in Mombasa, Kenya. Although students will be required to do background reading on Ethiopia and Kenya, emphasis will be placed on actively seeking out the indigenous narrative or viewpoint through living (at least for a few weeks) in African communities and interacting with, and most importantly, interviewing, members of the indigenous population. Our History and Political Science classes will meet separately in (usually) morning sessions before going out into the field the rest of the day. In History, students will learn about oral traditions (see for example the article, "Notes from Academe: Kenya")[1] and the benefits and drawbacks of oral histories as compared to other sources, such as written, archaeological, or ethnographic ones. Methodology training will entail learning how to conduct and interpret material from face-to-face interviews. Students will have to consider issues such as how we, as an "outsider" audience, interpret other people's history; how that problem is compounded if an oral history is conveyed in a language we do not know; and what the value or validity of interviewing specific groups, such as market women, missionaries, dock workers, or school officials, is on their respective histories. Then students will have to weigh the validity of these oral histories in comparison to those written or constructed by "experts" in various fields.

The Political Science component of the course will seek to examine the dynamic of both domestic and international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), in the context of a failed African state. Emphasis will be placed on domestic NGOs. The class will focus on the roles that NGOs play in processes of democratization, social service delivery and grassroots economic empowerment. The course aims at training students to critically evaluate the functions of these organizations in the context of contemporary African economic and political development. The students will shadow a specific NGO for at least a week-and-a-half. Using standard participant observation techniques it is expected that they will come away with an understanding of how these organizations do their work. For example, if we choose to shadow an NGO whose basic role is to operate as a political interest group, students will be expected to be cognizant of the group's issues. Second, the class will focus on the NGO's methods of interest articulation (lobbying), the pressure points (specific governmental structures and personnel) and why they were selected. Thirdly, the course is designed to help students appreciate the challenges that NGOs face in their relationship to the state. Similarly, if we select an NGO whose main function is to deliver social services, we shall seek to understand the methods of delivery, the relationship to the state and how effective the organization is. The basic objective is that in the end the students will be able to use the Ethiopian and Kenyan case studies to evaluate the status of NGOs as models of development in Africa. In both the History and Political Science courses, the writing requirement consists of a minimum of two observation/process pages due each week while we are traveling, for a total of at least six pages, which will interpret, analyze, and draw conclusions from interviews.

Part II. Non-Curricular Experiences

The logistics of study abroad present different challenges for different institutions. Likewise, the challenges on the ground in Africa may be the same but the response to them may vary from group to group. This part of the essay endeavors to share some of the more salient experiences drawn from the two study abroad trips we have organized to Africa.

Our initial challenge in organizing study abroad in Africa was the college policy of requiring students to pay extra tuition for the travel course, in addition to airfare, room and board, etc. While this policy lasted, it clearly limited the number of students who could afford to participate in the program. As of last year, our institution adopted the policy of incorporating May Term tuition in the overall tuition costs for students, leaving them responsible only for travel costs. Such a policy gives a tremendous boost to enrollment in all Roanoke College May Term courses, and we might add, gives credence to our institutional goals related to international studies.

The next task has to do with pre-departure preparations. For us, these begin at least a year in advance. Realizing that it may be partly a function of our small college study infrastructure, we would nevertheless alert new group leaders that they are, for the most part, on their own. For example, in investigating conditions in the country we

wanted to visit, we found African embassies in the US to be of no help. African diplomatic missions have only played the role of visa issuance where legally required. We have had to sift through information from the State Department, travel agents around the country, and American embassies in Africa.

Our experiences convince us that a study abroad trip to Africa requires that the participating faculty become educated in several fields. Travel agencies seem to know very little about Africa, necessitating our becoming pseudo travel agents. We spend a great deal of time scouring over relevant top-rated travel books and making decisions before we propose an initial itinerary to the travel agent. The travel agent can usually handle it from there. In any case, the turn around time whenever you present a series of questions to the agent is likely to be very long. The fares quoted may be too high and making reservations for hotels, safari tours and trains or buses can be difficult if not impossible. Thus the choice of travel agency is critically important.

As part of our pre-departure preparations we also research communicable diseases and the vaccinations and prophylactics required for our travel. This information is posted by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and may be obtained either from one's campus health facility, local health department or from the web (www.cdc.gov/travel). We prepare handouts for our students of all required as well as optional immunizations, in a list with costs for each.

Along with tour and health expertise, faculty leaders become public relations gurus. In order to placate anxious parents and concerned college administrators, faculty must fight the negative images and stories about Africa that pervade the American media. One negative news story before departure can scuttle the entire trip. Our plans to teach a course in Uganda in 2000 were foiled by the tourist killings in the southwest part of the country in 1998. On the other hand, if the story breaks while in Africa, as did the story on the Ebola virus, you can expect parents to begin a recall campaign. This was the case while on our study trip to Zimbabwe several years ago. Fortunately, we were able to assuage parental alarm, explaining that the distance between Zimbabwe and the Congo negated a threat to our group's welfare.

Furthermore, at a typical small school such as ours, with a tightly structured curriculum calendar, the trip is often limited to three weeks. It is therefore inevitable that students be engaged in some sort of pre-departure introductory lectures, focused on a single text or handouts of different readings. The challenge of course is that the students are expected to add these lectures or notes to all the other courses that they have going that semester. As a result we encourage them to do some reading on the plane!

Logistics on the Ground

On the ground in Africa, there are several ground rules. Rule number one is that students travel in groups, wherever and whenever they leave the hotel or the host family's house. This security measure usually works very well. Rule number two is to insist that students follow instructions. This sounds simple and obvious, but it has been our experience that students often take on a cavalier, tourist attitude once they alight from the plane in the country of destination. Once in the Ngorongoro crater in Tanzania, a student reached out from our sightseeing vehicle to feel a lion's mane! Another time while canoeing down the Zambezi, a student wanted to feel the back of a hippo with his oar!

The physical infrastructure of a country that is targeted for a study abroad program is as important as the factors that determine the object of study. In a short three-week program such as ours, we cannot afford to miss a day or two, due to unreliable trains, buses or taxis. Nor can we risk getting stuck due to a washed away road. So we always take these factors into consideration. It is quite possible of course that infrastructural complications can be a learning experience in and of themselves. In any case, both Tanzania and Zimbabwe have fairly well developed tourist industries and as such have relatively good communication infrastructure.

This leads into the issue of whether the group should confine itself to one place, let's say at a university or a hotel, or travel extensively around the country. While this decision may be dictated by resource availability and subject of study, we have had to make a conscious choice. Clearly the logistics of transportation and accommodation are much more complex if the nomadic model is applied. But the rewards from such an endeavor are worth considering. The nomadic model offers the best opportunities for appreciating the cultural,

geographic and environmental diversity of the country in question. Some of the drawbacks include time spent on the road and away from actual study, constant rearrangements of rooming patterns, and varying financial situations.

We have not had the opportunity of having students stay with host families in Africa. Despite our desire to have this happen, we have found it hard to connect with someone who might be able and willing to make such arrangements. It seems to us that host family plans need a native or at least a well-connected person in the country of destination. We have not been fortunate enough for this to happen.

Closing Remarks

Our students invariably extol the value and the enjoyment of the Anthropology and Political Science courses we have previously offered in Africa. They impact the students' lives in a way none of our courses taught on campus can. Much credit goes to all the African people we have encountered on our excursions because they have responded to our naivete and shortcomings with patience, good humor, and hospitality.

Currently we are excited about the potential of our new intensive learning course, AFRICAN FACES AND VOICES, and already we have ample enrollment for the 2000 May Term in Ethiopia and Kenya. We have always been enthusiastic about and deeply gratified with not only the intellectual growth but with the social growth of U.S. students who have traveled with us to African countries. They learn to successfully cope with or to better understand the ramifications of, in many instances, fewer amenities, a predominantly agricultural economy, a less developed infrastructure, a climate less conducive to physical well-being than they are used to, and the sight, smell, and feel of dire poverty. They expand their horizons, often escape their ethnocentric and Eurocentric mindsets, and almost to the last one of them, want to go back to Africa. Of the students who have kept in touch with us, one has returned to Africa twice, once working at the American Embassy in Johannesburg and again as part of the American elections monitoring team to Malawi. Another has been lobbying her company, American Electric Power, to post her to one of their branches in Africa. Yet another has visited the continent on several occasions for pleasure.

We have watched with great satisfaction the metamorphosis of our students' attitudes following our visits to Africa. Like the Peace Corps, study abroad trips have marked the beginning of a love affair that starts essentially with a blind date. If Africa is to remain on the radar screen of American foreign policy, the most vital chip in that process has to be the study abroad programs to Africa. These programs help dispel stereotypes, expose students to the realities of the African condition, which, they are surprised to learn is not fundamentally different from theirs. Students develop a long-lasting relationship with the continent that in our opinion could never be forged by any foreign policy initiative.

We are convinced that the best way to learn about Africa and Africans is being there.

Notes:

1. Andrea Useem, "Notes from Academe: Kenya," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. May 7, 1999, p. B2.
2. G.A. Theodorson and Achilles G. Theodorson, *A Modern Dictionary of Sociology*. NY: Barnes & Noble, 1979.

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