Knowledge, Power, and Uncovering Bias: Revisiting the Notion of Immersion

BY NERIKO MUSHA DOERR

I’d like you to answer a few questions excerpted from an intelligence test developed for 9th and 10th graders.

**QUESTION 1:** Where would it be bad manners to take food?
( ) store house
( ) dining hall
( ) meeting house
( ) whare puni

**QUESTION 2:** When you leave a cemetery, what should you do first?
( ) have a meal
( ) tell jokes
( ) sing a song
( ) wash your hands

**QUESTION 3:** What is a waka?
( ) bird
( ) horse
( ) storm
( ) canoe

Can you answer any of these questions? If not, do you lack intelligence?

These questions are excerpted from a famous satire of an intelligence test. They challenge our assumptions regarding what constitutes intelligence, competence, and knowledge (though these notions have different connotations, I will treat them as interchangeable here for the sake of readability). Introduced in an article published in 1971 in Aotearoa/New Zealand against the backdrop of an outcry that children of Maori background, the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand, were underachieving at school, the satire makes starkly visible the cultural bias in the notions of knowledge. For the Maori people, the test is not a satire—it reflects commonsense knowledge and Maori children will perform well. Pakeha (white New Zealander) children would demonstrate academic underachievement. The narrative of poor performing Maori people dominates because the intelligence tests that New Zealand uses are made from Pakeha understanding of what counts as knowledge.

This test illustrates the argument developed by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977) that the dominant group’s view of what counts as knowledge—often based on the “common sense” for what is valued by its members—prevails in the educational system and discourses, and children of marginalized groups suffer “academic underachievement” through limited access to such “knowledge” outside school.

This approach alerts us to look at what we take for granted as “knowledge.” It urges us to ask questions: How does our understanding of “knowledge” determine what we think of as important? How do we pass this conception on to the next generation?

I suggest that this kind of approach is helpful when thinking about study abroad—an argument I develop
more fully in “Do ‘Global Citizens’ Need the Parochial Cultural Other? Discourses of Study Abroad and Learning-by-Doing.” I ask the above questions regarding the notion of immersion, a way of learning to gain a particular kind of knowledge that is prevalent in study abroad. By examining three study abroad guidebooks, I investigate effects of the way we perceive what immersion is and what knowledge is produced.

I focus on what these guidebooks suggest study abroad students do to immerse themselves in the host society and what kind of comfort zones they need to leave in order to do so. The guidebooks suggest that students immerse in the host society by living as the locals do, ideally through staying with a host family; making “native friends”; connecting with strangers on the street; and floating around in the environment itself.

They further suggest that students disengage from home ties that can be accessed virtually through the Internet and phones or visiting family members; limit contact with fellow American students who are studying abroad; and avoid the world of computers, TV, and portable media players.

What does this notion of immersion push us to think is important? The notion of immersion suggests that learning occurs through interacting with local people. Knowledge gained in other ways—in the classroom or through interacting with fellow U.S. students—is not as important.

What kinds of worldview does this notion of immersion suggest for us to have? The above hierarchy of outside and inside classroom learning creates a particular worldview that values education in the United States more than that of the host society because this hierarchy only exists within the study abroad context; classroom learning is considered more academic in U.S. colleges and universities. That is, classroom learning abroad is not valuable but classroom learning in the United States is, implying a hierarchy of education systems in the host society and the United States.

Suggestions to make “native friends,” connect with strangers on the street, and float around everywhere imply homogeneity of the people in the host society and their fundamental difference from people in the United States: any “native” friends, strangers, and space have something new to offer. These suggestions also project a rootedness of people in the host society: anybody existing there belongs to the host society in ways that represent the host society. This can be positive as it is inclusive of immigrants and sojourners as part of the host society. However, this tight people-space connection portrays people in the host society as immobile and rooted in the area rather than mobile and cosmopolitan. This may not be, and likely is not, accurate. The suggestion to avoid fellow U.S. study abroad students also implies homogeneity of people in the United States: U.S. students no matter where they are from have nothing new to offer to each other. This differs from students’ actual experiences as demonstrated from my interviews with U.S. students who are amazed at how different Americans are even within their study abroad cohort.

Furthermore, the suggestion to avoid contacting home implies that home is accessible from abroad: that is, home is globalized. Suggesting avoiding the world of computers, TV, and media players implies that these things are not part of the local life of the host society. When the use of computer technology is viewed as having access to the global world, this suggests the daily life in the destination to be parochial, not connected to the global world.

Who gets advantaged and who gets disadvantaged by such worldviews? As the notion of the global becomes connected to progress, and the notion of the parochial becomes connected to backwardness (Tsing 2000), this worldview creates a hierarchical relationship between the United States and the study abroad destination. The United States is viewed as global, accessible from anywhere in the world through the Internet and its students traveling everywhere to study abroad. The study abroad destination is viewed as exotic, immobile, and parochial—thus backward—with homogeneous people leading a unique life that is fundamentally different from the United States.

The notion of immersion is important because it pushes study abroad students to pay attention to the ways they spend their time abroad and consciously push them—
selves to experience things that are not available in their home country. Exploring the notion of immersion makes us aware of its risks and forces us to refine our approaches to study abroad.

In discussing anthropologists’ activities of ethnographic fieldwork, which (like the notion of immersion) used to be considered as learning another culture through daily interactions, James Clifford (1997) argues that what anthropologists gain from fieldwork is not the understanding of circumscribed “other” reality but rather “a constructive negotiation involving at least two ... conscious, politically significant subjects” (41). Similarly, we can view study abroad encounters not as immersion in another culture with a clear boundary but as connecting with diverse people we meet—both people in the study abroad destination and fellow U.S. study abroad students. We can view these people we encounter during our study abroad not as representatives of a culture to learn about or ignore, but as fellow human beings with various subject positions who may or may not share ideas, sensibilities, and materials. Instead of creating the binary of us versus them, we can encourage students to relate with individuals through whom they can better understand the diversely intersecting social, economic, cultural, and political situations that affect them.

The approach suggested by the Māori-centered intelligence test based on the theory of Bourdieu and Passeron led to appreciation of diverse types of intelligence and knowledge. Aotearoa/New Zealand is experiencing revitalization of Māori language and community empowerment through alternative Māori-centered educational systems from kindergarten to university—Te Kōhanga Reo, Kura Kaupapa, Whare Kura, and Te Wānanga—where Māori knowledge is valued and its transmission is controlled by Māori people. Inspired by Bourdieu and Passeron’s approach, multicultural education began challenging white middle class centered academic curriculum in the United States. While these approaches continue to be resisted, they open up new discussions and search for new possibilities.

My intention is to revisit taken-for-granted notions in study abroad and encourage others—including students—to take a similar approach (see Doerr 2015). For example, we can encourage students to reflect on taken-for-granted notions such as global citizenship: Are CEOs in multinational corporations, (alumni) study abroad students, working-class immigrants, and refugees all considered global citizens? If not, why not? When students imagine the “inhabitants” of the host society, what type of individuals do they think of in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, age, urban/rural, etc.? What does that tell us about their expectations about the society? How does that affect the ways students interact with various people in the host society? By revisiting our assumptions through these questions, we can prompt students to think about power relations in their study-abroad experience and beyond, igniting a new conversation and new approaches.

ANSWERS TO THE INTELLIGENCE QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1: meeting house  QUESTION 2: wash your hands  QUESTION 3: canoe
REFERENCES


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