

Novices in the Field: Filling in the Meaning Continuum

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Introduction

Of late, I have been reading about field schools and study abroad programs and all of the educational promise they hold. I concur with the glowing assessments. I conducted my own field school in Belize last summer and was delighted with the results—so much so, that the month-long program will be offered annually from now on.

The school was more like a tour of social problems and predicaments. We moved from place to place every four or five days. Belize is both small enough and diverse enough to permit dramatic changes of scenery by travelling a mere few hours. Each venue was selected to highlight specific issues: urbanization, poverty, and politics in Belize City; ecology and tourism on Caye Caulker; culture and ethnicity in Dangriga; immigration in San Ignacio; and so on. The frequent moves were invigorating. The geography and ethnic mix captivated the students and kept the group charged for the duration of the program.

“School” consisted of regular morning classes (Ethnographic Writing and/or The Anthropology of Developing Nations) featuring a topic of the day and frequent outings and guest lectures. But the preponderance of time was unstructured. Students were free to explore on their own, to “follow their hearts”—a rarity in their educational lives, and one that they truly appreciated. Such intellectual freedom, of course, is the essence of the field school experience. Allowing students to shape their own learning and to test their knowledge, endurance, and nerves is what makes field schools special. For many students, the creativity unleashed begins to shade into spirituality. Constrained only by the

requirement that they conduct twelve in-depth interviews and report on three cultural scenes (e.g., a funeral, a domino game, a fishing dock) over the course of the month-long program, students entered into a novel partnership with their professor—one based on mutual trust and sharing—and the resultant sense of collegiality is the strongest I have ever experienced with students.

My students passed myriad tests. Employing local youth culture to gain access to “the exotic,” they hit the streets, talked to anyone who would listen, danced until dawn, and constantly recalibrated their world view. They interacted with panhandlers as well as elites. They sampled local cuisine. They experienced both an earthquake and a tropical storm. They learned about currency devaluation, immigration, and commodity flows. They made many friends. In short, these students extended themselves. And they loved it. The days were not long enough, and a few participants were tearful when the day of departure arrived.

What happened down there? In trying to comprehend the precise nature of our success, I consulted the literature. Various authors report on, inter alia, the improved self-image, enhanced communication skills, and rededication among students who have participated in their field schools (Wallace; Gmelch and Gmelch; Ward; Grant et al.). They cite student evaluations (“It was the best/most productive/satisfying academic project I have ever participated in”) to support their claims (Ward 234). But they seldom take the next step and ask exactly how or why all of these things happen. Take Wallace, for example. He reports that:

Students learn much about the culture they visit. They become more mature and more understanding of themselves. They develop better interpersonal skills and new sensibilities about the wisdom of older people, rural life, or race and class. Frequently, they return with a more positive attitude toward their own formal education (217).

He characterizes these benefits as the “intangibles” of participating in a field school and leaves it at that (217).

Of course, there are anthropological theories one might apply to gain insight. Two that immediately come to mind are the trusty old “rite of passage” explanation and the more current social construction of identity theory. According to the former, the novice ethnographer experiences “culture shock” due to the differences in values and behavior of the peo-

ple s/he is studying. The resulting disorientation proves productive in the long run, however, since it prepares the ethnographer for the imaginative leap of faith involved in coming to terms with an alien way of life. In short, upon recovery from culture shock, one is graced with newfound perspective that makes possible both the deciphering of the riddles of culture and self-discovery. Gmelch and Gmelch propose as much in their article on field schools, suggesting that “individual change and maturation occur during periods of discontinuity, displacement, and dysfunction” which, they add, is precisely what happens to apprentice fieldworkers living on their own and coping with surprises that are part and parcel of living abroad (224).

A second and somewhat opposing explanation is proffered by identity theory, which views cultural immersion less as a source of stress than as an opportunity for enlightenment and the exercise of human agency (Berger and Luckmann; Giddens). Dread is replaced by daring in this model. Indeed, one might say that my apprentice fieldworkers possessed a high tolerance if not an affinity for the ambiguities and uncertainties of the field. (Granted, Belize is hardly perilous; to the contrary, it is relaxed, nonthreatening, and often enchanting.) Accordingly, they were simply taking advantage of the relaxation of normative rules and the availability of a plethora of novel symbolic resources. The result was a vigorous renegotiating of identities—indeed, I suddenly found myself in the company of dancers and drummers, herbalists, Spanish and Creole speakers, basket weavers, fishermen and Rasta men ... citizens of the world.

Other Views

The preceding discussion of culture shock and personality makeovers has not advanced the explanation of what happens in a field school very far, if at all. These are, strictly speaking, descriptive models, and though I found myself alternately invoking Weberian human agency and Van Gennep's model of ritual status change (separation–liminality–reincorporation) as a way to understand my students' sudden metamorphoses.¹

I was also aware that something else was going on: cognitive changes were taking place as well. Not only were students making conscious choices about identity, they were also acquiring—or rewiring—

"schemata"² with which to reappraise the numerous curiosities that they were encountering. They gained an appreciation for alternative ways of organizing sensory data: what was sacred in one society might be profane in another; multiple taxonomies—indeed, multiple knowledges—were possible; and the meanings guiding local actions were shared understandings which, if not altogether random, were at least culturally specific.

How did this happen? Bohannan provides a clue. Employing a cognitive approach, he asserts that despite the existence of many different satisfactory solutions to the challenges of living, culture standardizes its members' choices (9). This is because of the way we learn as children. We assimilate culturally specific meaning categories and systems into which we file sensory data. In a word, we are "hardwired." Our thoughts, then, are nothing more than schematically organized perceptions in that we "file what we perceive into patterns we already know" (20). For example, we learn that some edible substances are "food" while others are not; similarly, a fine porcelain dinner service conveys more prestige than does mere crockery (41). In short, our very perception—the act of receiving and organizing sensory data—is shaped by cultural values. Culture thus provides a prescription, or tradition, which is limiting, and which has the unfortunate effect of making all human beings provincial (21). It is not surprising, then, that when a group of apprentice (read: idealistic) fieldworkers takes leave of their society, they notice—and begin to question—perhaps for the first time, the premises from which their standardized choices derive.

Eckert picks up where Bohannan leaves off, for she explains how, precisely, humans' choices are standardized in the first place. Writing on the social construction of identity among American teenagers, she takes a decidedly structuralist approach to the phenomenon of socialization. The cognitive domains of everyday teenage life (in fact, typical of Western thought in general), she asserts, exist as a set of binary oppositions such that "behavioral choices are typically binary, offering alternatives that are seen as opposites and excluding other choices altogether from the range of accepted behavior" (69). Binary choices of many sorts (e.g., dress, territory, cars, music, language) conjoin, forming a network of associations—"webs of significance" as Geertz might refer to them—thus strengthening the system of oppositions. For example, among high-school students who

identify themselves as “burnouts,” the acts of smoking cigarettes and wearing rock concert tee shirts are mutually implied. “Jocks,” on the other hand, disdain smoking and don polo or button-down shirts. Again, one implies the other; an entire range of symbolic choices is made consonant, one with the other. As Middleton observes, “specific meanings are bundled together into larger systems of meaning as part of a group’s general emotional and intellectual outlook on the world around them” (57).

The effect of this structured symbolic system, according to Eckert, is to restrict individual perceptions and choices:

Decisions are played out in the continual exercising of oppositions, which set up the social world in terms of binary choices and simplify the appearance of the choices to be made (70).

The simplification of choice, she continues:

leads to oversimplification of values, and the overwhelming judgements of “good” and “bad” associated with the categories prevent individuals from recognizing the independence of many of the decisions they are faced with (71).

The result is “cognitive limitation,” wherein black-and-white and right-and-wrong appraisals are employed to negotiate the social world (95).

Adelson, in an essay entitled “The Political Imagination of the Young Adolescent,” concludes much the same:

The youngster enters adolescence with a remarkably thin repertoire of motivational and psychological categories available to him (sic). He is like a naive behaviorist; he does not look beneath action to its internal springs. There is little sense of inner complication. Men act as they do because they are what they are. A man acts selfishly because he is selfish; the crime is committed because the man is a criminal. The vocabulary of motives is both impoverished and redundant (qtd. in Eckert 95).

In sum, these writers focus on the essentializing and thus constraining nature of culture: “A person can learn only what the cultural environment [allows],” says Bohannon (20). The result is nothing less than imprisonment (21). For Eckert, too, the continuum of possible cognitive

and behavioral options for American teenagers is, in reality, reduced to the endpoints of the continuum. Alternatives to the binary system described above—a frilly blouse, for example, in lieu of rock concert tee shirts or polo shirts—are anomalous and considered weird and/or puerile. The binary category system, whereby each category defines itself as the antithesis of the other³ is hegemonic. In fact, Jocks and Burnouts approximate adult Middle and Working Classes respectively; hence, adolescent social categories anticipate and maintain the American social class system. Bohannon's prescriptive provincialism (or "prison") is, by Sophomore year, resolutely in place in the sense that high school students have come to regard their particular version of culture as "part of the natural world" (21).

Into the Field: Filling In the Continuum with Other Possibilities

The preceding description, I contend, represents the mindset that novice fieldworkers take with them into the field. Yet, despite the foreboding analysis, many writers— those mentioned above—also believe that as adolescents mature, they learn to liberate themselves somewhat from the rigid definitions and prescriptions imposed by culture. They become less willing, says Eckert, to accept either/or alternatives, or to be led by categories set out by others (95). Agreeing with Adelson, she notes a greater willingness of older teens to "break set"; that is, to challenge the assumptions, tacit or otherwise, of a particular question:

Should the government do A or B? Now [the adolescent] may say, 'neither,' ... or suggest ... some entirely new solution which bypasses or transcends the terms of the question (Adelson qtd. in Eckert 95).

My argument, based on observations of students in the field, as well as on data generated by them, is that such change, such maturity, such willingness to "break set," is hastened, more extensive (i.e., covering more cognitive categories), and longer-lasting in students who venture into the field for a significant period of time, for the simple reason that they see for themselves other solutions to the challenges of living being deployed. As a consequence, many handed-down assumptions are no longer taken at face value. They no longer "make sense." The discreteness of the binary

category system, wherein everything is seen “in black and white,” begins to blur. As this occurs, previously inevitable associations of meaning—Middleton’s and Geertz’s respective bundles and webs—begin to unravel, freeing students’ minds to render other than prescribed interpretations of sensory data. In short, new (i.e., non-binary) standards are conceived as students acquire the skill “to correct for their own culture” while observing others (Bohannan 38). Doing so, according to Bohannan:

requires an unusual capacity to see one’s own culture as an attribute of one’s self rather than as part of the essence of either of one’s self or of the natural world (38, emphasis in the original).

The ethnographic endeavor is often explained by way of metaphor—specifically the vaunted “mirror effect” of ethnographic research:

When we look at others, we are looking at ourselves, too. We see similarities and we see differences. Comparison is inevitable. We locate ourselves in the sea of human variation by comparing ourselves with others in order to know who we are, or who we are not (Middleton 65).

Note the binary dimension of human perception once again in these lines. As with Van Gennep’s “Rites of Passage,” this is an elegant but inadequate explanation of what happens in the field. It does suggest, however, that doing fieldwork can reveal a disquieting narrowness of self—a concession many ethnographic apprentices are unprepared to make, for as previously stated, the field exposes them to other possibilities. As they observe and question “the other,” and as the meaning continuum is filled in with myriad alternatives, students commence the liberating process of unlearning, of “unpacking” their premises. Consociated symbols are delinked; bits of “reality” dissemble. In short, students in the field fight back, and thus begins the makeover.

These are moments of transcendence and my students were there: liberated from stultifying cultural prescriptions, they were freer, happier, and fulfilled. Having spoken with one guy, who introduced them to another guy, who knew a woman who played drums/practiced herbal medicine/knew the details of a particular land transaction, they built networks that conferred information and, ultimately, perspective. Replacing misinformation with accuracy, I would argue, is uplifting to anyone.

Knowledge is power; veracity is sublime. The effects of gathering and processing data were cumulative; the more understanding my students gained, the more they craved (and the more confident they grew that they could attain it). So, it was off to sample the conch stew, or to spend an afternoon pulling weeds in a milpa. Their daring rewarded, they gained nearly instantaneous self-esteem. Many saw sudden possibilities and could place themselves into a meaningful future scenario for the first time in their lives. Once again, the question is, how does this happen? What are the cognitive mechanics of this metamorphosis?

In his article on intercultural education, Mestenhauser enumerates diverse cognitive aspects of international education. Currently a professor of Educational Policy and Administration at the University of Minnesota, he is the author of more than 80 scholarly publications on international education, as well as a three-time holder of Fulbright grants (Philippines, Japan, Czechoslovakia). Mestenhauser has consulted with 36 universities both in the United States and abroad on international education, and has served as president of both NAFSA (Association of International Educators) and ISECSI (International Society of Educational, Cultural and Scientific Exchanges). His insights, deriving from cognitive anthropology, cognitive psychology, and nearly fifty years of experience in international education (Mestenhauser, personal communication) are fresh and persuasive to this anthropologist, in spite of the fact that he provides no empirical evidence to support his claims. In what follows I shall examine his argument and illustrate it with suitable examples from my students' Belizean fieldnotes.

Rewiring the Mind

According to Mestenhauser, the reasons that participants in study abroad programs develop cognitive skills are: (1) they are confronted by new things, (2) they are unable to play their customary roles, and (3) they are forced to process a great deal of information (2–3). Beyond that, he enumerates 13 specific cognitive adjustments made by students in the field. These are:

- ability to recognize differences;
- understanding the differences between emic and etic thinking;
- ability to recognize a knowledge gap;

- ability to communicate cross-culturally;
- ability to recognize scarce knowledge;
- ability to think comparatively;
- ability to change self-perception;
- ability to know how to compare one's own country;
- possessing knowledge of other countries;
- possessing diagnostic skills;
- understanding differentiation;
- ability to recognize trends in other cultures;
- understanding cognitive complexity and cognitive integration.

Elaboration of each of these skills, together with their consequences—as measured via examples from my students' writings (i.e., their interviews and cultural scenes)—are the focus of the following.

1. Ability to recognize differences

Recognizing differences, says Mestenhauser, “is the first step toward restructuring one's thought pattern” (3). This, he explains, is because the normal tendency is to deny or oppose differences rather than deal with and learn from them.

The example of Belize City's itinerant traders is apt here. Initially, my students were much troubled by them for they called into question their own compassion as well as their now-cherished claims to cultural relativism. They dealt with itinerants by avoiding them when they could, or with grudging donations when they could not. They were repeatedly frustrated by the pitches and ploys. Labeling itinerants “bums,” “hustlers,” or “panhandlers” provided only short term relief. The more enterprising took taxis rather than traipse the teeming streets of Belize City. Linda's comments are typical of this early phase:

People were riding bikes and walking mostly. There seemed to be a lot of people on that main street. The funny thing is, most of them were just standing around and most were men. Is that all they do all day long? Why weren't they at the office or factory or dock working?

It was not long, however, before many students experienced a change of heart. This followed consideration of the economic structure of

the country and perusal of unemployment data (15 percent of adult Belizeans are unemployed; another 5 percent are underemployed [Sutherland 1998]). For many, this was the first time they had ever heard of the informal economic sector, which was immediately appealing, for it provided a new intellectual category with which to evaluate many of the differences they were observing. They quickly realized that the people they passed in the streets every day—including young children—were actually on the job. As their understanding took root, and as they began to speak with more of these people (for one of their assignments was to interview 12 Belizeans), they began to marvel at the creativity, the perseverance, and the plight of many Belizeans.

Donny, for example, met Ivan, a fisherman whose boat had sunk, forcing him into the informal economy making and selling drums and peddling ganja. Donny referred to him as an “average businessman looking for any opportunity he could find.” Another student, Bill, had similar things to say about the man who consumed a flaming paper napkin in the bus terminal: “when he finished he held out his hat—more informal economy; he had performed a service, delivering on his promise ‘to show us something we had never seen before.’ “

Mick, too, met a couple of men offering unusual services. The first recited United States trivia: “he knew all fifty states and their capitals and all six non-Presidents who have been on U.S. currency.” The second man was a trivia expert as well:

He asked me to name any play or musical. “The Sound of Music,” I said, and he proceeded to sing a song from that title. “Annie Get Your Gun,” I said. He repeated the title, then spaced out for a few minutes. At last he mumbled a few words about a woman in Colorado who meets a man who changes her life. Another long pause, then he started to sing “If you can shoot a gun, I can shoot it further. No you can’t. Yes I can. Anything you can do, I can do better.”

Mick mused that tourists give these guys tips because they know more about America than Americans do. Acknowledging this novel aspect of an economy set the stage for other accommodations of difference that he and others would make over the course of the program. Becoming aware that such differences are “out there” is a profound discovery for anyone, let alone apprentice field workers.

2. Understanding the difference between emic and etic thinking.

Study abroad students come to understand that etic (outsider) and emic (insider) perspectives both yield valid knowledge, says Mestenhauser (3). They also learn to shuttle back and forth between the two—what he terms cognitive alteration—when both are operant simultaneously. Moreover, where others might be reluctant to see things emically for fear of compromising their identities, study abroad students learn to appreciate this added way of knowing. The combination of all of the preceding, Mestenhauser says, promotes comparative thinking which, he advises, is neither simple nor obvious.

The problem of childhood was something that really puzzled my students while in Belize. Peg, for example, found 15-year-old Beverly's nine-to-five, Monday-through-Saturday work routine ridiculous. "In the States," she reasoned, "adolescents need work permits to work even twenty hours." Rhett commented of his encounter with Irwin, age 11, "I wish I could have shown him that happiness is found inside oneself and not in money, but like other working children around the world, bringing home money to help put bread on the table brought more peace and comfort to the family than knowledge and personal growth could." And Linda, was very concerned about 14-year-old Jarris's recurrent truancy. "Our conversations invariably came back to education and the difference it can make," she writes. Jarris would have none of it, however. He informed Linda that he could not go home at night unless he brought food for his younger sisters, and he insisted that he could survive well enough by hustling and day laboring. To add to Linda's dismay, he told her that he avoided planning because he believed that he would be dead by the age of 30. Linda lamented the plight of this boy whom she described as "young and innocent" (although he admitted to "beating people up" and to enjoying "smoking weed and drinking rum"). Trying to make sense of it all, Linda came to the conclusion that childhood is not the same everywhere and that many Belizeans, despite their youth, are no longer children. As one woman instructed her, "those kids go out on the street making money doing who knows what, and when they take it home to mama she doesn't ask them where it came from." For Linda, this admonition proved to be a convincing lesson in emic thinking, for as any anthropologist knows,

merely recognizing difference is no guarantee that one will appreciate how that difference is perceived by “natives.”

3. Ability to recognize knowledge gap

Students studying abroad inevitably come face to face with the limitations of their own cognitive maps, says Mestenhauser (3). They discover, in other words, that their educational system has not prepared them for some of the things confronting them, and that many things exist about which they are unaware. The result is uncertainty and insecurity, both of which have cognitive and affective consequences (with regard to decision-making and critical thinking).

Several illustrations from Belize are useful here—from spirituality to sexuality. With regard to the former, my students probed the symbolic and functional aspects of African-derived ancestral cults and Rastafarianism. They reexamined the role of Christian missionaries, as well as various theories about the collapse—and pending revitalization—of the Maya. They experienced firsthand the peculiar outcome of religious syncretism. Cults, rites, dreams, cures, myths, visions; they heard it all, and in so doing began to understand why Belizeans do some of the things that they do.

Likewise sexuality. Belizeans’ often differing attitudes toward sex and sexuality left a few students at least temporarily uncomfortable. A dance called “the Punta” was offensive to Linda, who remarked that it appeared “as if the dancers were merely having sex with their clothes on.” She later regretted her judgmental view: “I wasn’t at home anymore; this is the kind of dance Garifuna do to Punta Rock music.” Soft spoken Donny was advised by his informant Steve that in courtship, male sensitivity was not a valued asset. “Women don’t like a soft man; men here have to be aggressive in order to be noticed.” And Patty found out from informant Kurt that Belizean men are direct. “If they want to talk to you or sleep with you they just come right out with it; it saves time.” When she replied that American women find that insulting she was told that “Belizean women are different.”

Editorial considerations prohibit further discussion of the knowledge gap. Suffice it to say that it was also abundantly evident in areas such as temporality, the family, social values, history, and as suggested

oftentimes above, economic structure.

4. Ability to communicate cross-culturally

This skill is linked to the former, i.e., the ability to recognize a knowledge gap. It is the remedy to the uncertainty and insecurity spoken of in that context. In Mestenhauser's words, "cross-cultural communication is based on the theory of uncertainty avoidance," and it comes about when taking stock of strangers, struggling for comprehension, and correcting misunderstandings (4).

Of course, ethnographic apprentices assigned to conduct 12 interviews are doing a lot of stock-taking—and some misunderstanding to boot—and consequently get a lot of practice at cross-cultural communication. Moreover, hanging out at discos and markets is not for shrinking violets. Michelle, for example, dusted off her high school Spanish to speak with Dominga and was surprised at how well they connected. Jennifer turned ethnographic opportunist when Jonathan, whom she labeled "a jerk," wouldn't leave her alone. "Finally," she says, "I decided I might as well get an interview." Among other things, they discussed religion, race, and the status of women. Priscilla described her conversation with Lionel, who had fallen on hard times, as "natural and local." And Bill simply listened as Daniel gave an account of his formative years:

I met a man named Daniel today on my way back from lunch. He is 23 years old, a Creole and a Rasta. He was born on a farm just outside the city. When he was five years old his dad beat up his mom. She tried to run but fell down the stairs and broke her neck. She died soon after. His father began drinking. Daniel doesn't talk to him much anymore.

5. Ability to recognize scarce knowledge

Scarce knowledge, according to Mestenhauser, "is knowledge (read: awareness) about the lack of knowledge" (4). Knowing what we do not know stimulates us to learn, and such motivation helps close the above mentioned (see #3) knowledge gap.

A good example here was my students' sudden interest in Belizean

history. After only a few days, they realized that their lack of historical information was going to impede their understanding of the people they were meeting.⁵ Without even having read Boas they intuitively understood that for them to be able to understand extant cultures and societies they first had to understand how those cultures and societies came to be. This was especially pertinent with regard to ethnicity in Belize. After all, anyone with even a fleeting interest would want to know, what exactly are Mayans, Mestizos, Creoles, Garifuna, East Indians, Mennonites, and Hong Kong Chinese doing in this small Central American country anyway? It was difficult to fully understand peoples' stories when many of their referents—Baymen, Chicleros, Arawaks and Caribs, St. Vincent, the Valley of Peace, economic citizenship, for example—were unfamiliar. Spurred on by what they did not know, they plunged in with a sense of urgency and found that ethnic diversity coincided neatly with colonial and post-colonial commercial interests. From the earliest settlers (the British Baymen) seeking dyes for the burgeoning textile industry, to the recent wave of Hong Kong Chinese seeking escape (via purchase of Belizean passports) from socialism, my students learned to think about history and society as processes instead of still lives. From a personal standpoint—as an educator—it was delightful to see students making what is often a difficult connection, namely between the micro and macro levels of abstraction.

Donny, for example, was fascinated by the large citrus orchards and the fact that they were almost exclusively worked by Guatemalan and El Salvadorean refugees who referred to each other as cousins even when they were not. Mick met Delcia, a middle-aged Creole woman, who complained that the Chinese with their aggressive commercial style were taking over Belize. Jennifer was amazed that dark-skinned Harry had blonde hair and blue eyes, the legacy of his Creole and Scottish ancestors. And Rhett was surprised to meet a woman of Indian descent (though Belizean bred) who had no idea of what a Hindu wedding ceremony entailed. Finally, Priscilla demonstrated cognizance of present day tourism's impact on Belizean society. She interviewed a British tourist on Caye Caulker who told her that he didn't see how his presence affected the local peoples' lives. "Chris," she concluded astutely, "was one of the drivers in the further development of the island, one who left the locals behind, one who brought the international scene to the local level, and one who took nothing else home—except one or two souvenirs from San Pedro."

The furnishing of missing information—in this case, colonial history—helped students bridge the cognitive gap. This not only eased their frustrations, it also amplified their learning potentialities.

6. Ability to think comparatively

Comparative thinking, says Mestenhauser, is “a higher-level cognitive skill that is essential to any discussion of international events” (4). Of a similar order as analogical thinking, it differs from that particular cognitive skill in that, unlike analogy, the outcome of comparison is unknown. This is a vital skill, Mestenhauser points out, due to the fact that “in the cross-cultural context, everything is comparative across domains . . . and comparison is needed to see both similarities and differences” (4).

Racial constructions and attitudes of Belizeans toward race provided an interesting comparison for my students, all but one or two of whom hail from the state of Georgia where, sadly, race is still a prominent social construct. Although most of the students in the program were Anthropology majors, and thus familiar with the problems of racial categorization, this particular issue was nonetheless instructive for them to witness and compare firsthand. Through their interviewing, students learned that Belizeans see race in an altogether different manner than most Americans are accustomed to. That is, where Americans subscribe to such essentialist notions as the so-called “one-drop rule,” which assigns the color “black” to a person with as little as a drop of black blood, and where Americans view race as fundamental to one’s identity, Belizeans have markedly different ideas (Wright; Sutherland). One is that racial categories are not limited to black and white designations, but contain many gradations in between—mulato, moreno, pardo, claro, and combinations thereof—a system of classifying which, as Sutherland points out, “indicates much greater recognition of miscegenation than in the United States” (79). Another is that Caribbean race issues focus less on issues of segregation and integration than they do on a ranking system that privileges lighter over darker color.

Not surprisingly, therefore, race was an issue that was raised frequently by my students. Donny visited Steve’s home which, he reports:

had two bedrooms and a nice-sized living room. On the television were many photographs, including several of his brother who had married a white woman with whom he had had two children. I asked him how his parents felt about that, to which he replied “they didn’t mind; it’s the person, not the color, that matters.”

Ginny attempted to discern Erin’s race, which caused the latter to laugh because he was of Mayan, Spanish, African, and European descent. Mary spoke with Ray who had served in the United States military where, he said, he had been treated as a black American—a bizarre experience for him. “People look at you in a different way, and though military plays lip service to integration, there is a great deal of discrimination there.”

7. Ability to change self-perception

Studying abroad, says Mestenhauser creates a different social psychology and knowledge about the self (5). Our self-perceptions are challenged by the way others see us—who we are, how we behave, what we value, and how we think about others. Our personalities and deeply held values change instantly and often depending upon what features are called for in a particular situation. All of this is done so that we can communicate effectively with others. If, on the other hand, we are unable to accomplish this—if we withdraw to comfortable positions—our efforts will fail.

I mentioned previously Linda’s unease at Punta dancing (see #3). She writes, “I must say that I was uncomfortable from the moment we arrived. I was definitely outside of my comfort zone and I made up an excuse to leave.” This contrasts dramatically with Mary’s feelings that same evening. She writes:

I can’t begin to describe how much fun I had Punta dancing the first night in Dangriga. I went right up to the front and tried to ask one of the girls how to do it. They all started laughing. One of the boys was dared to dance with me, and the next thing I knew I was surrounded by a crowd of people. That was such an icebreaker for me.

Mick also challenged himself, in one instance “to look beyond material wealth, or I will get nowhere,” and in another “to walk through these ghetto streets without fear” which he initially found hard to do. Priscilla

demonstrated patience she did not know she had on the long bus ride south to Dangriga: "Our trip began with a two-hour wait at the bus station," she writes.

Later, one of three men standing in the aisle and passing around a bottle of cashew wine, asked her "can I sit in your lap pretty lady?" Priscilla kept her cool and politely refused. Rhett kept his cool, too, when a visibly angry police sergeant he was interviewing blamed escalating crime in his country on the influence of America.

The ability to suspend, even if only momentarily, their self-perception (which, as Mestenhausem reminds us, is tied to self-esteem), allowed my students to deal with discrepancies (namely, between what they thought of themselves and what others presumed to know about Americans), which enabled them to surmount obstacles to communication (5). All of this ultimately translated into their ability to cross boundaries.

8. Ability to know how to compare one's own country

This skill develops as a result of exposure to another culture, happening specifically when subconscious and implicit knowledge is brought up to the level of consciousness, as often happens when people are immersed in a foreign culture (Mestenhausem 5). This is the celebrated mirror effect (see p.9) that Anthropology often refers to; that is, when we look at others we often see ourselves. The verdict for my students was an unavoidably mixed one. On the positive side, they could appreciate their nation's technology, leisurely living, and economic security. Donny's portrait of Sam, aged 48, provided a striking reference point; he had been a *chiclero* (i.e., a tapper of tree sap, which is used to make chewing gum), a farmer, a slash-and-burn horticulturalist, and a tour guide. Tina's Godwin earned his living from day to day. Sandy's Orlando insisted that the country needed more manufacturing. And Michelle's Jesus was a 70-year-old carpenter without work, without a pension or social security, and plenty of worries about the future. Students could also appreciate the high quality of America's health and education systems (many remarked on the high number of Belizean children who did not attend school), its infrastructure, and civil society. Mary, for example, who spent an afternoon in a hospital emergency room, described it as horribly "unsanitary":

The room was small. There was one nurse and a baby who could not stop screaming. It went on for at least 15 minutes. The nurse moved me to a bed that had no sheet on it. It took the doctor all of two minutes to examine me. She pressed all over my stomach and pronounced (my illness) a colic infection.

In a word, my students learned what it means to live in an affluent society. On the negative side, however, students bemoaned the vast scale, the fast pace, and the materialism and arrogance of their nation. In contrast, Ginny commented that “life is simple and straight in Dangriga,” and Mick was amused that people on Caye Caulker didn’t know what day of the week it was, and that several young people he spoke with did not know their age. Some students were concerned by what they perceived as an inordinate amount of influence wielded by the North. Bill’s friend, Daniel, lost his job as a postal worker when 800 people were laid off in an IMF-mandated austerity measure. At the same time, the price of sugar more than doubled when subsidies were removed. And the entire country was nervous about a pending currency devaluation. And while few totally would deny the benefits of development, Donny worried about the stratification and environmental destruction it left in its wake—as it often had at home:

the coastline is being sold off; mangroves are being cut down and golf courses built. Many sites become tourist meccas, forcing locals out due to the high cost of living. Then, the next thing you know, the tourists stop coming, preferring to go somewhere “more authentic.”

Students further enjoyed the uniqueness of the country’s regions and towns, contrasting them with the increasingly homogeneous look of cities and towns in the United States. Jennifer, for example, delighted in Dangriga’s architecture and spatial layout: “We came to a residential area of town with houses on stilts, painted all different colors, with sandy paths for roads, and people talking in their yards or relaxing on hammocks in the shade of the front porch.” Students also admired the extended (as opposed to nuclear) families that characterize Belize. Donny’s Steve had 33 relatives in Dangriga. Priscilla’s Marina and Mayo, ages 7 and 4, respectively, carried messages to extended family members on Caye Caulker, thus earning them a place of importance in the society.

9. Possessing knowledge about other countries

This, says Mestenhauer, is not general knowledge another culture, but rather content-based or disciplinary knowledge (5). It is knowledge of a specific area the culture, the implications of which are more complex than one might suppose. For specialization can require different modes of learning (e.g., process learning as opposed to content-based learning); hence, it cultivates differing cognitive skills. What skills? Comparative thinking; emic and etic thinking; differentiation; integrative thinking. A good example was Priscilla, an archaeology student, who threw herself into Mayan archeology. Receiving information nearly simultaneously from lectures and books, as well as from her own interviews and a number of ruins themselves, Priscilla began to sort through—and to sort out—classic and contemporary Mayan culture. Along the way, it was necessary to distinguish between ethnicity and ethnonationalism, and a host of competing explanations for the Mayan demise as well as their current revival. Another student, Michelle, investigated Belizean music as well as the country's national language policy. And a third was Liz, who did a directed study in religion during the program

10. Possessing diagnostic skills

Diagnostic skills are critical survival skills for international students, says Mestenhauer (5). They advise them whom to trust, when to tell jokes, what is important, and how to learn that which is important. Such skills are not only valuable in their own right, they also underlie “meta learning,” a multi-step process essential to apprehending greater abstractions.

As mentioned throughout this article, the students who participated in my field school took good advantage of the opportunities afforded them by their Belizean peers to gain perspective on the “exotic.” By the end of the program, all had become adept at establishing “rapport,” that crucial prerequisite to gaining access to the other. I was relieved, for it certainly had not started out that way. To the contrary, things started slowly. Due mostly to shyness, my students were overcome with inertia. Most had never spoken with foreigners before and several stuck close by me and listened in on my conversations. I indulged them for a few days

before admonishing them that ethnography is not a group enterprise. Some took the warning to heart and devised their own strategies for participant observing. Michelle spent an entire day with a chambermaid on Caye Caulker, making up beds, sweeping floors, cleaning toilets, and doing laundry. Mary tapped in to local gossip while having a pedicure at a salon in San Ignacio. And Max spent an afternoon with street kids in Belize City.

Donny's account of Steve provides insight as to how conversations might proceed—and how meta knowledge develops from diagnostic skills: "The first thing we began talking about was piercings. He noticed my tongue stud and showed me his left nipple which had a loop of thread through it." Steve gave Donny a tour of the town and introduced him to several people. "He pointed out who was cool and being seen with him would let everybody know that I was cool and they would leave me alone." From this beginning Donny and Steve went on to discuss work, sex (#3), race (#6), food, family (#8), dreams, and Steve's prison experience.

11. Understanding differentiation

Differentiation is the ability to understand parts, relationships between them, and relationships between them and the whole, says Mestenhauser (6). Such relationships, of course, change with time. Most people are able to recognize such complexity in their own cultures though they may be less capable of doing the same when looking at others. Instead, they view them through simplistic and stereotypical lenses, a procedure that precludes the possibility of realistic comparison and invites gross insensitivity. Cross cultural students who have gained the ability to differentiate, Mestenhauser assures us, are less likely to commit such mistakes. That the notion of race varies considerably across cultures, as discussed above, is one illustration of this.

As a social scientist, the thing I most want my students to be able to differentiate is, of course, society itself. The melting pot metaphor, though enticing to indiscriminating observers, is of no analytical value to researchers. Belize society is complex; it is multi-ethnic, stratified, marked by strong regionalism and religious variation; the politics can be fractious. That most Belizeans feel a sense of loyalty to their state by no means connotes that ethnicity is unproblematic; today's citizens often

turn into tomorrow's ethnic separatists. Consequently, students have to learn how to analyze sociopolitical situations. One place to begin, advises Connor, is with terms used to describe human collectivities. Accordingly, my students learned to be precise in utilizing such terms as state, nation, nation-state, and nationalism. They learned the significance of Belize's two major political parties, the PUP and the UDP. They observed the undertakings of both multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations. By program's end many were submitting insightful analyses of Belizean society. Donny, for example, noted rising tensions among the Creole population as more and more Guatemalans and El Salvadoreans were resettled in the country. In combination with Creole emigration (mainly to the U.S.), he observed, the balance of power between the two political parties was tilting toward the PUP. Max's Johnny, a Creole Rastafarian, pleaded with him not to patronize East Indian merchants, while Linda's Darren asserted in turn that "Rastas only want to sit around and smoke ganja and not work." In these quotes one sees the melting pot metaphor exposed as facile ideology. My students learned that Belizean social structure was much more complex.

12. Ability to recognize trends in other cultures

This dynamic (or diachronic) way of seeing stands in marked contrast to static (or synchronic), arrested learning. One way it comes about is as the result of the ability to differentiate, as mentioned above. Another is as the result of establishing meaningful social and intellectual relationships with people from the countries visited (Mestenhauser 6). Such relationships ensure learning long after the journeys are concluded as students "self-renew" knowledge and gain a special appreciation for change and how it impacts people and institutions. Mestenhauser argues—convincingly, I think—that if scholars of the former Soviet Union had cultivated this skill, they would have better understood the dynamics of the U.S.S.R. and been able to foresee its demise. Nearly all of my students made numerous contacts with whom they exchanged addresses. Several have, indeed, kept in touch. In fact, we recently had a reunion and took up a collection for a young Belizean woman we all met and admired who has fallen on hard times.

13. Understanding cognitive complexity and cognitive integration

Unlike the controlled learning that takes place in an academic setting, where one thing is learned at a time and juxtaposed to another, the foreign setting hits students with events, conditions, and stimuli at random, and requires an altogether different order of cognitive integration, according to Mestenhauser (6). Attempts to cope with myriad stimuli by way of reducing things to a manageable unit, *a la* traditional academic learning—what Mestenhauser refers to as conceptual reductionism—cannot but fail in a cross-cultural setting, however, due to the narrow analytic focus they engender. Students who participate in cross-cultural education, on the other hand, have much greater potential to develop skills of cognitive complexity and integration, which afford them a wider focus of inquiry (6).

In Belize, my students had to navigate unfamiliar landscapes (city plans, the reef, the rain forest) and mindscapes (race, class, gender, religion). They had to calculate prices in a novel currency, acclimate to the weather, food, and pace of life (quick in Belize City, slow on Caye Caulker). They had to adjust to the lack of creature comforts (hot showers, cold drinks, clean clothes, quick service). They had to reach out to—and sometimes pull back from—strangers, and deal with the emotional fallout either way. They had to monitor their own behavior, all the while trying to bring more and more information (unsafe neighborhoods, development paradigms, local mythology, biting insects) within their purview. When they took the time to contemplate some or all of these things, they began to be able to see links between some of them. It is this complexity Mestenhauser has in mind when he says that “academic learning and international education tend to go in opposite directions” (6).

Conclusion

Not long ago, two students who had participated in my Belize Field School (Mary and Michelle) gave a Brown Bag talk entitled “Making Sense of the Exotic.” In her introductory remarks Mary stated:

For the past two years I have sat in my anthropology classes and heard

about my professors' field experiences and wondered when it would be my turn. Belize was not about going on vacation or obtaining academic credits. It was our laboratory. And I for one did not stop learning for a second. The trip meant interacting with everyone we encountered in Belize, whether light, dark, or in between. Never before had I felt like a minority, but one of the exciting aspects of fieldwork is the challenge of developing trust between oneself and people who are different.

For her part, Michelle noted:

As anthropologists, we hunger to understand why people do the things they do. When we started interviewing, we started learning, and when we are finished today, we hope to have shown you that in order to thoroughly understand something, books cannot be our only avenue.

These passages point nicely to what might be referred to as the affective-intellectual synergy that is the driving force of a field school. The understanding that students gain as a result of processual (as opposed to content-based) learning, liberates them—literally, gives them the tools—to consider other arrangements of reality. Key to this, as Eckert's research suggests, is the temporary suspending of norms, which allows new symbolic linkages—"webs of significance"—to form. Conventional links are called into question in these liminal periods. Some are forsaken. Bohannan calls this "recontexting," or more simply, "play" which, he explains, "is a way of lifting our ideas out of their original context so that they can be developed in a new way, in a new context, free of the burdens and limitations imposed by [that original context]" (72). In this article, I have affirmed Mestenhauser's identification of numerous tangible cognitive skills associated with studying abroad, which I believe encourage recontexting to take place. The effects of play are well known to us all.⁶ One result among my students, as I hope I have illustrated above, was a newfound awareness that subsequently translated into a sense of fairness, which they seemed to find tremendously gratifying. I would also argue that this gave them the sense of well-being that so many people talk about in the context of ethnographic field schools.

Notes

1 Human agency refers to creative acts of intentioned individuals that generate social form and meaning. In implying the capacity for willed or voluntary action, agency challenges the determinism of structural theories. Van Gennep's model of rites of passage enumerates three phases associated with a change of status, these being separation whereby the individual moves away from a fixed point in the social structure toward something unknown; liminality, an ambiguous phase whereby s/he is "betwixt and between" two stable conditions; and reintegration, whereby the initiate returns as a person of higher rank.

2 Schemata are defined by Casson as "conceptual abstractions that mediate between stimuli received by the sense organs and behavioral responses" (qtd. in Bohannan 18).

3 Much as "race" in much of the South (where most of my students are from) is reduced to the dichotomy of "Black" and "White."

4 All of the data in the following derive from field interviews conducted by students in the Summer of 1999. Also, people's names have been altered in what follows.

5 Bibliographic work, assigned prior to departure to avert this eventuality, is useful—if the students are serious about it.

6 Recent findings concerning brain chemistry link learning and pleasure by way of chemicals called endorphins.

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