

“International Education and Higher Learning”

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David G. Fuller

Many who value international travel and education remember an incident or image so vividly that they can see it years later as if it just happened. For me, it was the sight of the Roman Colosseum late at night shrouded in orange light and resonating with the cries of wild cats. For one student who shared with me and others her vivid memory about her international study tour to Africa, it was the image of a family of baboons running across a plain in Kenya at sunset. For another student who accompanied an international service learning group to Guatemala, the relationships with the people, the building of the home for a poor family, and the overall experience were profoundly moving. She and others reported their interests to change majors and career plans as a result.

Besides memorable travel experiences, though, a philosophy of education and higher learning goals and outcomes justify our support for our own institution’s international education. The extent to which we understand and describe the importance of international education and travel determines how well we can sustain it and ensure its prominent place in our higher learning curricula. Toward that goal, I intend to suggest in the next few minutes objectives and strategies to design and enhance the qualities and effects of international experiences.

I will begin with a discussion of a 19th Century American writer, Henry David Thoreau, a writer to whom I have devoted much of my own scholarly attention and one who is, curiously enough, an unlikely spokesperson for international education. I will also draw upon insights from contemporary theorists who examine the phenomenology and meaning of local and global places, to underscore the importance of a concept of place in international education. With Thoreau’s and the theorists’ guidance, I hope to offer a rationale as to how international education and higher learning connect theoretically and practically.

Thoreau graduated from Harvard in 1837, which was, as one scholar explained, known for “rote learning, regimentation, and rowdyism” (Richardson 11). Ralph Waldo Emerson,

Thoreau's contemporary, underscored the role of higher education in America in his address to Thoreau's graduation class in 1837, and explained, "Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office,— to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame" (Emerson 1012). While Emerson nevertheless praised Harvard and said that "most of the branches of learning were taught at Harvard" (Harding 51), Thoreau did not hold his college education in such high esteem, and countered, "Yes, indeed, all of the branches and none of the roots" (51). A Thoreau scholar and biographer, Robert Richardson, Jr., agreed with Thoreau's skeptical assessment of education and said that Harvard during that time was in a period of stagnation, not one of liberal learning, but one of a "thorough drilling" (10).

Despite the curriculum and pedagogy known for its rote learning, Thoreau nonetheless thrived on his own merits and pursued his keen intellectual interest in the classics, languages, and a wide range of world literatures and philosophies. His voracious reading and studies allowed for a rich academic education in global history, culture, and thought. At the same time, he revealed a fascination with international sites and travel. In 1837 he read with interest and admiration Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Italian Journey, and Thomas Gray's The Vestal, A Tale of Pompeii. As Richardson observed, for Thoreau, Goethe's Italian Journey was a "pilgrimage of self-discovery" (29). He concluded that "[re]ading Goethe's account of his Italian trip made Thoreau all the more eager to start on his own travels" (29). Thoreau showed interest in travel narratives and read many other accounts that revealed the world through the words of others.¹

Central to his learning and intellectual growth, Thoreau's academic interests in travel literature and international places did not cause him, interestingly enough, to travel internationally in his life. Rather, his travels throughout his relatively short life of 45 years and his strong interest in learning through experience led him to explore his local place in New England, primarily the fields around his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. What might surprise a reader of Thoreau is that someone with such a notable interest in international subjects and travel would avoid many appealing opportunities and invitations. With the exception of a brief trip to Montreal and despite strong and persistent encouragement from others to travel

abroad, he simply chose not to do so. For example, a friend of Thoreau, the Englishman Thomas Cholmondeley, invited him to England and then at another time invited him to travel with him to the West Indies, with an offer to pay all expenses. In his eagerness to entice Thoreau to go, Cholmondely promised to explore the Amazon valley “where he might see the great *Victoria regia*” (Harding 349). Thoreau did not accept either offer and responded wryly that he fully expected to find the rare South American water lily on the Concord River (349). “I think I had better stay in Concord,” Thoreau responded.

Granted, international travel then was not as fast and convenient as today, which could have partially been his reason for not accepting the invitation. But even considering the challenges of international travel, I believe that Thoreau’s life and work reveal not as much his reluctance to travel abroad as his conviction that he had just as much to learn and gain from local travel and in-depth observation. To understand this perspective, one should look at Thoreau’s philosophy of living and education, which could be best represented by his repeated use of the metaphor of digging deeply, as he explained in Walden, into the “secret of things” (230). Writing about his purposes for going to live in a cabin near Walden Pond, he made it quite clear that he, as he explained, “wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life...” (222). He believed and understood that the meanings he sought were as readily discovered and uncovered in the nature all around him, so it is little surprise that he chose to stay in his local place to discover those universal meanings and to write about them. One can well understand the responses and justifications he offered to those inviting him to travel abroad

His unique approach to learning and observation is, nevertheless, revealing to us who wish to understand the qualities of observation and knowing needed to enrich an international experience. In his essay “Walking,” Thoreau explains what he interprets as a primary aim of education and learning. Gaining knowledge and achieving a more in-depth understanding of things depend on a variety of intellectual processes, including observation, engagement, writing, and reflection. In this essay, he explains the qualitative and subtle difference between knowing and understanding and implies an intellectual process required for transcending rote learning and experiencing rather a learning informed by the intellect and direct engagement. He observes, “The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence” (294).

Sympathy with intelligence, as he referred to it, depends on a quality of full engagement in the subject. His teaching and comments about education revealed as well his aims to help students learn and develop this understanding and intelligence through study and experience. As he explains: “How could youths better learn to live than by once trying the experiment of living? Methinks this would exercise their mind as much as mathematics,” Thoreau claimed in Walden. His experiences with the rote methodologies at Harvard offered a revealing contrast to his belief in the effectiveness of direct experience, and it is through that contrast that we may understand the context in which his educational philosophy developed and matured.

From what we know of Thoreau and his life, the quality and depth of engagement with things was more satisfying and productive than travelling great distances to find what he could have found essential beneath his feet and in local places. We understand Thoreau’s choice not to travel abroad by understanding the influence of Goethe’s Italian Journey, which offered on one level an account of his travel through Italy but also on a deeper level an insight into the engaged process of knowing through analysis and intuition. What Thoreau seemed to have learned from Goethe, beyond an account of a trip merely, was Goethe’s special observation and active engagement in places he visited.

Phenomenology theorists who study and consider the notion of place offer additional insight into the quality of engagement in international education and, I believe, a better sense of the Thoreau’s experiences. John Cameron, referring to Henri Bortoft’s The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe’s Way Towards a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature, concludes that the ‘meaning’ of a thing is not understood by just stepping back to observe it, but “by immersion in the parts, each of which contains the whole...” (182). Cameron considers Goethe’s scientific methodology as a means to understand his own challenges to motivate students to gain more than just enthusiasm for travelling. Cameron sought to help students gain a deeper and more significant and responsible sense of the place itself. As he eventually realized, a place is not “so much a phenomenon as an infinitely nested set of phenomena—granite, heather, clouds, waves, ravens, tussock grass and so on, each of which could be the subject of the sort of painstaking observations that Goethe undertook” (184).

Another place theorist, Christina Root, in her article “The Proteus Within: Thoreau’s Practice of Goethe’s Phenomenology,” sees Goethe’s methodology inherent in Thoreau’s. She

explains: “Like Goethe, Thoreau was both poet and scientist, utterly committed to first-hand study of nature, and again like Goethe, he felt that the process of getting to know the natural world involved every faculty, intellectual, emotional, moral, spiritual and physical” (236). It is this special sense gained through an immersion in a place that reveals its meaning and value. To illustrate this methodology, I refer back to a student’s memory I explained at the start of my paper. We might understand that such a fleeting experience observing the baboons would offer an opportunity for the student to spend perhaps weeks and even months at that location, observing and recording information about the animals, interviewing local people, working to understand the baboons’ habits, and the challenges they face as they interact with the local environment. What comes to mind are Dian Fossey’s study of mountain gorillas and Jane Goodall’s chimpanzee research, which are, obviously more elaborate than what many students would experience, but they do nonetheless offer a better sense of the methodology of engagement implied by Goethe and Thoreau. Thoreau’s masterpiece Walden is a good example as well of an extended and in-depth study of the pond and its various meanings.

Theories of place offer still another perspective on how a local study and experience may indeed complement and enhance the experience of international education. John Cameron realized this potential synergy and the relationship between his local place and the global places. Upon his return from travelling to another location, he developed in fact a new insight into his local place and explains, “Yet it was only by travelling overseas that I was able to return to a new way of participating with nature that was available locally” (196). Doreen Massey, in her article “A Global Sense of Place,” dismisses traditional explanations of nationalism, heritage, physical boundaries, and even unique identities as indicators of place. What she acknowledges instead is that a complex of relations offers insight into the meanings of places and the experiences. “What gives a place its specificity,” Massey explains, “is not some long internalized history but the place that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particularly locus” (7). The character of a place, as she clarifies, is made up of “real relations with real content—economic, political, cultural—between any local place and the wider world in which it is set” (6). She suggests that a true sense of a place can be gleaned and understood by connecting that place to other places, and concludes, “What we need is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place” (7).

The immersion in a place and in its relations are no doubt enhanced by travel and then juxtaposing the local and global places. The qualitative and in-depth study and direct involvement of Thoreau's methodology complements exceedingly well the experiences afforded through international travel and study. It is through the intentional combination of both, I suggest, that students have greater opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of their local place and global places.

To illustrate this point, I will again refer to one of the memories I mentioned at the start of my paper, and this time the student's recollection of her experience in Guatemala. Her in-depth experience working with the people on location, her direct involvement in relations and features of the place, and her eventual discovery and admitted enlightenment about its meaning upon her return gave her something more than an enthusiasm for a discrete image of a place. It allowed her, as she reported and anticipated, to experience something especially powerful and eventually transformative. Her recollections of this international experience upon her return provided her as well a deeper understanding of the global place she visited, the local place to which she returned, and her own purposes and personal potential.

I believe that this international education and experience not only expose students to interesting sites of our globe, but can, if well designed and supported, allow through direct experience a deeper and more important sense of the special challenges of global places and consequently a clearer and more compelling sense of our responsibilities as global citizens. We can exhort our students to travel internationally for the novelty and excitement of the experiences, but those explanations do not hold the same promise and power as those that describe the value of understanding deeply the relations and dynamics of our local and global places. We can learn from Thoreau's insight into the processes of seeking meaning and gaining an intelligent sympathy for their places and the world through active participation and experience. Ideally, in terms of the values and goals we hold dearly in higher education, we can only hope to achieve a goal for students to develop as a result an awareness of their special and active role as global citizens—an higher order goal that all of us acknowledge, I'm sure.

To accomplish that international education and higher learning goal, we should build upon the successes of international service learning projects, support year-long study abroad in which there are deliberate immersion experiences in the local place, sponsor work abroad or

volunteer programs focused on specific issues and problems, establish problem-based learning experiences within the university curriculum in which teams of faculty and students work to address real local and global issues and problems, and support collaborative student-faculty research with partner institutions locally and in host countries. Within our own institutions and curricula, we should teach and model methodologies appreciating the need for a sense of local and global places, and at the same time promote active methodologies focused on the depth of places, active engagement, and critical thinking. It also seems imperative for those of us in remote and isolated places, such as in my own place of Northwest North Dakota, to create campus cultures that promote the values of cultural diversity and enhance our curricula with study about global interdependencies and issues affecting the quality of living for everyone on our planet (e.g., environmental issues, health, economic cooperation, peace studies, and basic concern for others).

The higher learning achieved through this study and experience provides the incentives and reasons to encourage students and campuses to address common global problems collectively and intelligently, and, I'll add, with sympathy and understanding. Finally, in the end, I would argue that it is our responsibility to train students as practical philosophers and to understand the direct relationship between international education and higher learning. Perhaps Thoreau would offer these lines from his Walden as his explanation to underscore this assertion:

“To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts...but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically” (155).

Thank you for your kind attention.

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¹See Richardson's explanation: "As early as his first term in college he was reading Hall's Travels in Canada, Cox's Adventures on the Columbia River, and McKenney's Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes, already showing a predilection for travel literature he was never to lose" (13). Before Thoreau's "freshman year was out he had read Irving's Columbus and the Conquest of Granada, Cochrane's Travels in Columbia, Bullock's Travels in Mexico, Mill's History of the Crusades, and Barrow's A Voyage to Cochinchina (now called Vietnam). He seems to have travelled widely," Richardson observed ironically, "in Cambridge" (13).