

FORUM

The Forum is intended to promote dialogue by providing space for shorter pieces of writing including opinions and suggestions, brief responses to papers, reports of research in progress, meditations, and descriptions of pedagogical strategies.

Engaging Culture: Guiding Students to Reflect on Cross-Cultural Experience

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In 2001, as part of its new core curriculum *An Engagement with God's World*, Calvin College instituted a requirement called Cross-Cultural Engagement (CCE)¹ so that students would experience other cultures, not merely as tourists but rather as engaged observer-participants. To avoid having students fall into the trap of superficial sightseeing, the CCE committee called for these courses to include a “careful, specific reflection component, including some written work that will be evaluated by the instructor of the course” (Implementation, 2).

All students on the Study in Spain program were already required to take a course titled “Contemporary Spanish Culture,” a course that could be easily modified to meet the CCE requirements in terms of content. More difficult to fulfill was the directive for a written reflective component. While it would have been simple enough to assign a paper on “What I have learned from my study abroad experience,” such a paper would have lent itself too easily to a cursory treatment of the topics and might degenerate into nothing more than a ‘heroic narrative.’ Instead, students complete two ‘bookend’ assignments that lend themselves to progressive analysis of the culture and to

development of a deeper understanding of underlying beliefs and mores².

The first assignment is presented to the students during an orientation period in the semester preceding the Semester in Spain. This series of questions, titled *Introspective Preparation* is designed to help students begin to recognize aspects of culture and cultural difference they may never have been aware of. The questions are divided into four sections. The first, *Academic Introspection*, deals with students' academic goals and expectations. The second, *Cultural Introspection*, includes questions such as: "What values do we hold as a North American society?" "What kinds of things do we consider important?" "What cultural evidence is there that they are important?" "From what you already know about Spanish culture, what values do you believe to be important there?" The third section, *Personal Introspection*, invites students to ask similar questions about their personal lives and values. Finally, the section entitled *Spiritual Introspection* leads students to consider whether faith is culturally conditioned. Students are asked to respond in writing to all of these questions, sending a copy to the Program Director and keeping a copy for themselves. A number of the questions, especially those pertaining to culture, are also the basis of group discussion during the orientation weekend. The goal is to have students become aware that they are not culturally neutral but rather influenced by the society around them.

While the students are in Spain they learn about culture in many ways: formally, through classes on history and culture (including the Contemporary Spanish Culture class) and during cultural excursions; informally, with their Spanish host families and through everyday interactions with Spanish people in all walks of life. By the end of the semester the reaction is almost uniformly positive: "the best experience of my life, wouldn't trade it for anything". However, although most students have made great progress in their language skills and although most of them have achieved good grades in their classes and are able to answer factual questions, until they face the second paper assignment in their Contemporary Spanish Culture class most have not taken the time to really reflect upon and analyze their experience in Spain.

As a way of framing the discussion and "priming the pump," this second assignment begins with the question, posed in *The Gift of the Stranger*, of why anyone would want to go abroad and suffer the difficulties and discomforts involved with being a stranger. The authors respond:

First . . . being a stranger does not mean to be altogether forsaken and alienated, but instead to be specially bonded to God [Second,] cultural clashes can illuminate the

different assumptions, values, and unconscious behaviors prevalent in the host country, and thus can provide rich insights into [one's] own culture and that of [the] hosts" (Smith and Carvill, 60-61).

Students are thus prompted to begin considering cultural values both in Spain and in North America. The assignment is set up as a series of steps. The first step requires students to look back methodically on their experiences and record their impressions. This task is supported by the work the students have been doing all semester: journaling, writing letters, discussing with friends and family. Subsequently, in the next step of the assignment, students must examine their initial reactions to and interpretations of their early experiences in Spain. This step also asks students to review their answers to the introspective questions posed before the program began.

Once students have begun to think in general terms about Spanish and American culture, the third step of the assignment requires specific examples and real experiences as evidence of what the students have learned. They are told to try to see Spanish society through the eyes of a Spaniard and explain it to an American. They must discuss the beliefs and values that are important in Spain and explain how those beliefs are made manifest in products, people, and social practices. Using concrete examples, students illustrate the relative importance of some things over others. The assignment provides students with quite a long list of products, ideas, and values from which they are to choose 3 or 4 items to explore in some depth in their essays. Topics include family, work, wealth, leisure time, social class, housing, food, education, children, the elderly, teenagers, religion, and many others. Above all, the goal is to have students think in clear and concrete terms about *how* things are and *why* things are. The assignment prompts students to recognize that concrete illustrations of culture are physical manifestations of beliefs and values. While not all students reach this awareness, they begin to learn to ask insightful questions.

One student began his essay describing his dismay on discovering that the place where he was to spend nearly five months was a tiny apartment with no yard or green space. Later in his essay he notes, "After my first surprised impression, I've realized that housing isn't worse than in the US, only different. America is a very private place with an emphasis on the individual; therefore many Americans have a big house and their own lawns" (Kleinsasser). Besides noting differences, this student went on to examine what those differences revealed about values in the two cultures.

Another student writes: “For the first weeks everything was a comparison to something back in the United States, but as the months went by my mentality changed from basing everything on comparison to trying to build an idea of an entirely new society and culture separate from comparisons and assumptions” (Cole). This student is beginning to recognize that his early impressions were entirely viewed through the lenses of his North American culture. He can now start to see Spanish society in its own light.

The final step of the assignment asks students to apply the same process to moral and spiritual issues. Again, they return to the early *Introspective Preparation* for a point of departure and they work to discern the relationship between external forms and underlying principles. Students struggle to understand how a country of so many churches and so many ostensible Catholics can be so apparently agnostic. Remarks one student:

While I know that there are many people my age in the States who don't believe in God and don't follow the moral teachings of the Bible, I've never spoken with so many people who don't know any different. Many times in the last few months I've asked myself if I would believe in God if I'd been born in Spain. It was good for me to meet people with different beliefs and outside the Christian community of Calvin. I understand that faith is more something personal than something cultural but ... I think that culture and history have a big influence on the beliefs of Spaniards. With all the emphasis on religious festivals and Church traditions, I was surprised to realize the lack of religion in the lives of Spanish young people. (Kauffmann)

Of course, not all students demonstrated great cultural insights or new, questing minds but many gave evidence of having carefully observed and considered the culture around them. While this paper assignment will continue to be modified and refined, it has already gone a long way toward helping students to reflect on “worldviews, expectations, traditions, and embodiments of faith, as well as on what the experience has taught [them] about themselves, their culture, and their own faith” (Implementation 2). By God's grace they will continue to grow in insight and develop their cultural discernment long after their semester abroad has ended.

NOTES

¹ More information about Calvin's CCE requirement can be found at the Calvin College website <http://www.calvin.edu/admin/fdrn/cce.htm>.

² Many elements of the assignment are discussed in this article. A complete copy of the assignment is available on the CCE website (see note 1) or by request from the author.

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