

TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCES

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I was once asked by a colleague – What percentage of a McMaster initiative is focused on community impact, on research, and on student learning? My answer was that it was 100% for all three. This answer only seems impossible to those who have never engaged a team of students and faculty in this way. The McMaster School has been able, with some success, to document community impact. Some of our students have presented their research at national conferences and we have evidence that students have utilized this experience to better their chances for jobs and graduate school candidacies.

As we prepared to publish this McMaster Journal in its revised format I was hesitant to lose sight of the growth in student learning that rarely comes through in project abstracts; namely, the effect that the McMaster initiatives have on students' self-definition. While, often elusive on paper, we regularly see these transformations in the scholars' faces and hear it in their voices. I looked at this more closely over the last three years through strategic discussion and writing prompts and through a series of video dialogs completed by students pre-trip, while on-site, and post-trip. The video dialogs were modified from the student interview questions proposed by Joyce Osland as a means for gaining a sense of students' development resulting from a transformational experience (Osland, 2003). These interviews in combination with the group discussions post-trip seemed to yield the most focused information because members of the learning community could ask for clarification as their peers described the changes within themselves they identified as resulting from the overall experience.

Specifically students were asked if and how they defined themselves differently as a result of their McMaster experience and several responses stand out. "I think about everything I do now HERE, in terms of THERE, every day," remarked one student who was beginning to understand how the cross cultural experience, the people he partnered with, and the conditions he saw in a developing country thousands of miles away contributed to his frame of reference. Another student said, "I'm more appreciative - not for what I have in the sense of material things, but for the opportunities I have; opportunities to learn, to grow, and to have a voice," thus clearly understanding the criticality of access to opportunity afforded or limited by political, social, or economic parameters. In terms of gaining an appreciation for diversity a student poignantly stated, "Now I can say that I respect and appreciate diversity - this is something easy to say if you are so far removed from another culture that you are never faced with having to deal with issues of diversity. I have faced and worked within another culture and I loved it. I don't look at the world the same as I did before - it is a much richer place."

Students have also evidenced an increase in efficacy. We hope that this along with our efforts to help students develop a more macro perspective of the causes of human suffering, will inspire them to utilize their professional skills to positively impact humanity long after they leave Defiance College. Some of the responses I have recorded give us hope that this will be the case. One student said that the impact of her project hit her when she got home and began telling the story to others. She said, "At my age, at my place in life I never thought I could do something this important, something that would have significant impact on others." Another student said, "I'm applying to graduate school and writing a purpose statement has been a chance for me to see myself in light of this project - I'm certain of my abilities and the direction I want to pursue. I didn't have this level of confidence before." During the Belize initiative in December, 2011 students recognized that economic caps on indigenous populations translate into an absence of political voice. This realization was the driving force behind

the development of two entrepreneurial initiatives about which a student remarked that “empowering people to have control over improving their income simultaneously provided their voices to be heard in political arenas – the community began to matter.” The addition of ‘new’ money in the community will provide for better access to education, land ownership, and improved infrastructure. According to another student “the village becomes less able to be ignored, less disposable.”

I know that students’ responses such as those above are considered anecdotal or at best qualitative data, but I feel that they provide evidence that we are responding to the challenge to encourage students to be active global citizens who have an understanding of the importance of individual liberties in improving the human condition and see clearly their role in addressing issues that negatively impact communities worldwide.

Reference

Osland, J. S. (2003). Using the Hero's Journey: A framework for making sense of the transformational experience. In N. A. Boyacigiller, R. A. Goodman, & M. E. Phillips (Eds.), *Crossing Cultures: Insights from Master Teachers* (pp. 111-127). New York: Routledge.

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