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The Merits of Applied Learning

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In the fall semester of my senior year in 1998, twenty-two years before the time of this writing, I participated in the National Collegiate Honors Council's Honors Semester in Thessaloniki, Greece. I still remember this experience as vividly as if it were yesterday: a four-month long study at Aristotle University in which half our time was spent walking through Thessaloniki's medieval streets and modern boulevards; interacting with the people on a daily basis in the limited (but workable) Greek we knew; and making a number of weekend excursions—beginning on Wednesday evenings for us—to surrounding areas: Athens, Pelion, the beaches of Chalkidiki, the monasteries of Meteora, Mount Athos (for us males), the peak of Mount Olympus, and for the rest of the group a weeklong trip to Crete while I sailed to Byzantium to experience the splendor of Istanbul (Constantinople, or simply “the City” for Greeks). To say the experience left a lasting effect on me would be an understatement. As a double-major political science and history nerd, not only did I eagerly apply for an opportunity to live and study in an area I was fascinated by, and not only did I have an opportunity physically to visit nearly a dozen locations I had read about since

my freshman days, but I made a number of lasting friendships—one of these friends came to visit me ten years later in 2008 during my stay in Belgrade, Serbia, and whose presence created a series of fortunate events that led me to meet the woman who would eventually become my wife.*

As in most City as Text™ (CAT) modules, the emphasis on learning outside the classroom through sight, sound, exposure, and experience offered all of us in the group a unique chance to apply our knowledge and skills from our respective majors and areas of concentration to practical, real-life living. More than simply a “study abroad” program where a bunch of Americans jet across the world to study in a foreign country, CAT methodology requires the student to view the city and its surrounding areas as a living, working, interactive classroom. For myself, being fascinated with Byzantine and modern Greek history, classroom instruction with some of Thessaloniki’s finest academics was still overshadowed by attending Greek Orthodox church services in the fourth-century church of St. Demetrios, speaking with vendors and shoppers in the open markets (who almost all bought me Greek coffee upon realizing an American could converse in passable Greek), or simply connecting visual sites to things I had learned about in books and lectures back at the College of New Jersey. Interacting with what were otherwise abstract facts, concepts, and figures for me and being encouraged within the CAT discipline to “get out there and experience”—as was so frequently imparted to us by our group coordinator—gave me and the other students an enormous educational advantage over our peers.

Fortuitously, this latest City as Text monograph on integrative learning and civic engagement is being written in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when traditional modes of education have been severely restricted, online or remote learning has become routine, and previously unassailable pedagogies in teaching are being reconsidered. In many ways, institutionalized academia has been

**How is that for City as Text™ curriculum: direct educational enrichment and indirect marital happiness? As I write this, my wife is in the other room, listening to a composition by Vangelis.*

under pressure (or assault) to adapt to new and changing circumstances for years (Bacon). Since at least 2010, I have attended nearly a dozen workshops and symposia claiming that online learning is the so-called “future of education,” proclamations that are usually met with audible groans and sighs from a skeptical audience of faculty who do their best to learn little more than uploading readings and syllabi to a class webpage. COVID has perhaps forever changed all that as online instruction, either synchronous or asynchronous, now defines most courses. Even without the pandemic to force all but the most recalcitrant professors to embrace digital technology, younger generations of students are graduating from high schools where interactive learning is increasingly commonplace. Additionally, the prevalence of information on YouTube and through podcasts, social media, and imageboard websites is becoming more of a mainstay in what I call “unorganized information gathering” by curious youth.

Ironically, formally trained college professors seem to be among the last group to embrace the myriad options technology offers. With university technology woefully behind the curve and more often than not less funded than in high school, and with courses that largely offer the same readings and assignments for years without changes to syllabi, the outmodedness of education that was heretofore perceived but tolerated has met its reckoning in 2020. Especially within the liberal arts and social sciences, where student enrollment has been in decline for years, departments and administrations remain either incompetent or uninterested in marketing fields of study to a generation of students more conscientious about where their tuition dollars will go. Particularly in universities that attract first-generation college students from working-class, immigrant, or otherwise less-privileged families, the question “what can I do with that degree?” is being asked more and more of deans, department chairs, and admissions counselors.

Within this period of rapid structural change to education, the experimental learning of City as Text is not only useful to consider but vital for reform. At the heart of its philosophy are methods of applied learning long championed but seldom adopted

by academics and educators. Applied learning bridges the metaphorical gap between the university and the public sphere by linking scholarship with interactive professional development, but more than merely adjusting educational methods to be more attentive to job requirements, applied learning empowers students to develop critical thinking and analytical skills that will make them valuable contributors to public-sector and private-sector decision-making processes. Thinking, analyzing, writing, and implementing are pillars of the CAT approach that, as a model of experiential learning developed nearly forty-five years ago, is more poignant and necessary than ever today.

Within my own field of political science, calls for applied learning in bridging the gap between the theoretical and the professional have been repeatedly issued at nearly every annual American Political Science Association (APSA) conference in memory, and as a discipline, applied social sciences offer many parallels to the dynamic nature of CAT (Andres and Beecher). First, problems must be identified and described. Second, they must be explained, and here is where most lesson plans and manuscripts end, but in order for our research to have any relevance beyond the Ivory Tower, we need one more step: making predictions. For all our large- and small-N research designs, we are still largely hesitant to make the predictions that guest speakers on Sunday morning talk shows make with reckless abandon even though we should be able to answer political and policy questions better than anyone else.

More often than not, this last critical step requires us to spend time outside the university and in the location we are studying. To understand why people do what they do, defend what they defend, vote for the people they vote for, and believe what they believe (all opening questions I ask in my class on Politics and Culture), I encourage my students to study the culture, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of a community; identify the symbols and narratives the group collectively identifies with; learn about the people in the community; and familiarize themselves with its art, which includes film, literature, architecture, and cuisine—all elements of applied learning that make education both dynamic and relevant

to real-world experiences. As part of making predictions, applied learning must map and frame an area of research, expand concepts of “text,” and augment learning that “reflects the complexity and varying dimensions of an adequate understanding of any given subject” (Daniel 12). These methods were given to us during our stay in Thessaloniki, and I applied them a decade later when living in Belgrade. They empower us to make educated predictions about our area of study.

The first method seems the most daunting but also the most dynamic: mapping and framing an area of research (Braid). What to study and investigate? What to research? Where to research? How to research? A natural starting point most likely is examining existing studies on a subject and getting a sense of what inspired others. Often, reading the introduction to a work is enough to begin delineating the boundaries of inquiry. For instance, my dissertation on the connections between collective cultural identity and democratic development in Serbia began by my reading the first few pages of a book on the country published in the late 1990s as the civil wars in Yugoslavia had just ended. The author began by offering a loose connection between ethnic groups displaced by war in the then-present and in centuries past. A quick and passing reference described the Great Serbian Exodus of 1690, in which twenty thousand Serbian families migrated away from their ancestral homelands in today’s Kosovo region and settled up north in what was then the Austrian Empire. The author also mentions that the town of Karlowitz served as the unofficial capital of this community, offered a central location for its ecclesiastic leaders, and would serve as an urban center for an emerging intellectual class in the decades to come.

Almost as if the author did not regard this piece of information as relevant to the rest of his work, no mention was made in the book of the value of direct experience of the place, and I realized I needed to go there as part of my field study. This one example demonstrates how important it is to draw one’s own map for individual discovery. Because I realized the potential trove of information to be found in an area almost entirely overlooked and neglected by

previous scholars, my learning and research took on a form of discovery largely unique compared to earlier studies. In this sense, the applied learning process of mapping is the educational equivalent of a jet-setting traveler's decision about where to explore next and the excitement of discovering a place previously untrod.

Once our mapping has been created and our field of exploration set, the second component is to decide what to study and, by extension, to identify the important elements in learning about the area, the people, the events, and the cultural traits. Again, CAT expands an understanding of "text" to include people, places, things, and events that can all be considered "primary texts." During my dissertation field work in Serbia, a number of monumental events were happening: presidential and parliamentary elections, Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia, and mass protests and riots in response. I can remember speaking with one of my dissertation advisors who effectively told me to put away all the books and articles and venture outside to collect what had to have been the critically valuable data to any political scientist. There will be time for writing later, he urged.

Although venturing out into the public sphere as an American was not ideal, the raw emotion displayed offered more information about political culture at the time than any published work. Additionally, the friends I made, including one who would eventually become my spouse, offered me the best texts one needed to study the culture of Serbia: film. Through my future wife, I discovered another untapped reservoir of information in the form of popular movies from the 1980s that were considered some of Serbia's finest cinema. Film, music, conversations with people at the local *kafana* or bistro, and walking the streets of Belgrade at both two in the afternoon and two in the morning all contributed to the mapping of my area of research and also provided critically important "texts" beyond published material.

The third component of applied learning—one encouraged in my study in Thessaloniki and practiced by my research in Belgrade—is the integration of various disciplinary approaches in one's research. Interdisciplinary studies are already common in political

science with the quantitative orientation of researchers relying on statistical data and with the qualitative focus on history, sociology, and anthropology. But what about art or engineering? What about music or public policy? What about business or public health? Applied learning also encourages collaboration with specialists not normally assumed to share common interests. Within the CAT semester in Thessaloniki, our student group took courses that offered collaborative projects in economics, history, archaeology, art and art history, urban planning, and civic engineering, where we learned more about the streets of Thessaloniki than I daresay the locals knew. A decade later, I still believe that some of the best research I conducted was communicating with a school administrator in Sremski Karlovci (the old town of Karlowitz) and exploring nearly every part of the city outside the emerging tourist centers with an adventurous Belgrade city tour guide. But more than just sites and experiences, interdisciplinary collaboration introduces the researcher to new texts as resources: movies, artwork, music, school textbooks, newspapers, magazines, festivals, and, most importantly, people to interview.

After revisiting CAT literature and reacquainting myself with the pedagogy, I realize how much of the City as Text immersion I experienced more than twenty years ago has been integral to my own university teaching two decades later and how much it has shaped and influenced the autonomy of my search beyond the conventional boundaries of political science. The impetus was instilled in me as an undergraduate at the College of New Jersey through some exceptionally dedicated and dynamic educators in the history department, but it took a full NCHC Honors Semester abroad for me to put these ideas into practice—ideas that are especially useful at a time when institutionalized education is under significant pressure to adapt to digital learning and when multidisciplinary versatility necessitates creative thinking and innovative analytics.

As many of us in higher learning are beginning to think about returning to a life after COVID, we will have questions about what the state of education will look like and what its capabilities will be, and we will undoubtedly focus on the need to expand instruction

outside the formal classroom. More than an opportunity offered to just a handful of students selected for specialized instruction every year through NCHC, applied learning like City as Text will need to be introduced to a wider audience, helping instructors ask the right questions and enabling students to conduct a creative search for answers through mapping, observing, listening, and, most importantly, reflecting in discussions and in writing.

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