

Constant Transformation

Elena Bantle

Public Administration/Spanish

University of Wisconsin- La Crosse

College of Liberal Studies

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I'm writing this from Chilean Patagonia: in a journal I'm wishing I would have written in more, and from a tent I'm wishing would have broken less. And as the stars pierce the dark southern hemisphere sky and notorious Patagonian winds make themselves known, it is clear that I am evolving. I'm in week four of a five week research trip, which, like so many of my educational experiences, has been incredibly rich and wonderful as well as a host of other inadequate adjectives.

I'm doing survey research. And with each interview, whether in the bright eyes of a gaucho or in the weathered features of a Señora, I know that because of this experience, I will never be the same. I also know that for me this experience wouldn't exist if it were not for its start in liberal education.

It was in the halls of the University that I first saw that this sort of experience was possible. It was there that I learned what questions I wanted answered, what I found fascinating. Through classmates, through professors, through classes, I began to see all there was to explore. To be transformed, to me, means for a person to change in a way that he or she is not the same as they were originally. Liberal education, like life, is series of transformations. Some are bigger, more notable, than others, but without exception they are multiple. These transformations, though sometimes reversible, cannot be erased. It could be compared to a progression of stepping stones- each gained allowing the person to move forward. And while a person can always retrace their steps, they are changed for having taken the path they did.

I think that a liberal education holds the power to transform any student and that each student will experience this transformation differently. For some it is sudden, and for others gradual. For some it is dramatic, for others, subtle. Personally, I have found these transformative experiences to be primarily of two veins: humbling and empowering. This

gradual accumulation of humility and empowerment has been a theme throughout my years here-both in the classroom and in the greater world.

Though initially the two may seem contradictory, they in fact complement each other. Perhaps it is a function of a liberal education's ability to open a person's eyes to new insight-simultaneously empowering the student by providing him or her with a new tool, and humbling by showing just how much more there always remains to learn.

In classes like Environmental Policy or Sociology of American Indians and the Environment, this was exactly my experience. I had a very minimal and generalized knowledge of these topics before going into the classes. After an academically challenging semester of class with professors teaching true to their passions (and thus, most markedly qualified), I can refer with confidence to the progression of the environmental movement, policy patterns, and the varying success of different models of implementation. I can recount the struggles of the American Indians, both during the colonial era and today. But I also know to look with great respect to the professors and others in the discipline who know so much more.

I was similarly impacted by my study abroad experience. Last year, I studied in Xalapa, Mexico. Before I left, I'd studied Spanish for about eight years, and was excited to hone my skills. But soon after my arrival, it was clear that I had much learning yet to do, and that my honing would be quite a bit more intensive than I originally imagined. After four months of university classes, living with a family, travels, and Xalapeño daily life, I came home. And along with new friends and lessons learned and prized memories, I returned much more confident (and orders of magnitude more proficient) in my Spanish. But what I also brought was a real appreciation of how much there still was to learn.

Sometimes a thing doesn't seem real until you see it. A foreign language isn't much more than a child's invented dialect until you step outside the classroom- and the people and cultures and places of textbooks might as well be fantasy until you are dropped into that landscape. Mexico showed me just how big the world is. The mountains were so tangible. Suddenly Spanish wasn't just a class, but the means of communication- for everyone around me! And the people-- I walked for twenty miles with a man who had never gone to school. My mountain bike guide in the Sierra Norte Mountains started working at the age of twelve. I talked with a woman whose bent stature showed the evidence of her daily trek with her heavy bundle to and from the market. In Mexico, I gained a real appreciation for the existence of other cultures- and realized there were many more yet to be experienced.

This research experience in Patagonia has been no less transformative. I'm researching the creation of Patagonia National Park- a future Chilean park being created by a United States-based private nonprofit. I arrived armed with weeks of preparatory research about the project and the area I would be studying. And now, after dozens of hours of interviews (speedy Chilean Spanish, by the way, is one of the most humbling of all the variations), pages of field notes, and days of participatory observation, I know I can hold my own in a research setting. I also know that to gain a full and true understanding of this place and these circumstances would take a lifetime.

Yes, I have changed as a result of my liberal education. La Crosse, Mexico, Chile... these experiences were humbling and empowering in their transformation. But it should be made clear that this is a transformation that is by no means complete. That is the thing about humility and empowerment: they are qualities that make a person strive onward... to continue to learn and see and experience, and to feel even more overwhelmed by all that awaits discovery.

And that, for me, is the biggest transformation of all. Instead of doubting in my path, or feeling confused about my priorities, today I face the future with an image and a vision of the person I want to become.

So as my time here draws to a close and as I head back to Wisconsin winter, the Patagonian winds will not falter. The workers here will continue to toil away, the mountains will be just as magnificent, the rivers as strikingly blue, and the night sky as dark as always. My tent (still broken, yet still standing) may leave a shadow of wilted grass, but that will soon disappear and like the rest, will remain as though I (and my notebook and my digital voice recorder) was never here. I, however, leave transformed.

One transformation among many, like one stepping stone on a path. Different than I was, never to be quite the same again. I am a wiser, stronger, more open than when I arrived. I have developed a real respect for these people, appreciation for this place, and gratitude for this culture. And as this landscape and this experience shifts into its position behind me, I gaze ever resolutely forward and continue to progress toward the vision of the person I strive to become.