
RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD

In an effort to encourage dialogue and reflection on matters of common concern and interest, we invite responses on selected articles from other educators, who engage the text critically and offer some reflections about its utility and validity.

JOHN CIVILLE

*Pastor, Holy Family Parish, Middletown, Ohio
Adjunct Professor, University of Dayton*

The inductive approach to doing social ethics was firmly stated in Vatican II's Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well" (Vatican Council II, 1987, §1). Mount St. Joseph's program on incarnational immersion-based learning, as described in the article by Dr. John Trokan, well reflects this methodology. Without doubt, students who participate in this learning program will have their eyes opened to the richness and complexity of spiritual, social, political, and economic issues among peoples of different culture. The concluding pages show that Trokan is well aware of the difficulties and challenges of this learning method. But this real experience in a wider world will raise questions in their studies and enable them to have a deeper understanding of their own culture as they see the interconnectedness in the human family.

I think this experience will give them a better understanding of the Church today. Haight (2004), in *Christian Community in History*, contrasts the Pre-Vatican ecclesiology "from above" with today's ecclesiology "from below." Haight shows that ecclesiology "from below" stresses historical consciousness, is rooted in culture, appreciates pluralism, understands the complexity of the modern world, recognizes ongoing tensions as normal, and is open to the Holy Spirit in a new way. The Mount St. Joseph program certainly prepares students for this vision of Church.

My own experiences as a pastor, a teacher of social ethics at a seminary

for 10 years, and a part-time teacher at the University of Dayton for the past 28 years have shaped my views. My views have also been influenced by my own immersion experiences, living in Rome for 3 years and spending 15 summers studying in Africa, Latin America, and India. There is something that forces reflection when you live among a different people and experience their culture firsthand. For example, after 35 years, I still have warm memories of living with three dedicated Ugandan priests, listening to their stories every night over steamed bananas, teaching in their school, and celebrating Sunday Mass in Latin under a thorn tree at one of their 19 mission stations. The devotion and the faith of the people still motivate me. Their tribal loyalties gave me a new understanding of the tribal loyalties in the Old Testament. Their lack of political freedom and the weakness of the Ugandan shilling gave me an appreciation of the political and economic freedoms I have always taken for granted. I did feel uncomfortable talking about life in America because we have so much in comparison. That only the women worked and knelt when speaking with their husbands was puzzling. Bride price made sense even though missionaries were against it. And the reflection goes on and on. So enriching and rewarding are these memories that I always encourage my college students to work for a time in a different culture.

Most formative for me was the lengthy study and dissertation on Julius Nyerere and his dreams of improving the lives of all peoples in Tanzania. One cannot help but liking and admiring Nyerere. A convert to Catholicism from the influence of Maryknoll Missionaries, Nyerere reluctantly led his country to independence in 1961. In his dream, he wanted to avoid the main problem plaguing developing nations: a few wealthy people controlling the lives of the vast majority. His *Ujamaa* (meaning familyhood) Socialism was a return to the tribal ideal that everyone shared and no one went hungry when someone had more than enough food. He dreamt of establishing small villages where people would work the land in common and share the produce in common. The advantage of a village was the possibility for a school, a clinic, a well, and a way to focus government aid. Villages would enable people to vote for local leaders and thus begin a democratic system of government for the country in which all would have a voice.

Looking back, two factors have tempered the dream: human nature and the laws of economics. From the beginning, people were reluctant to work hard if they did not receive more than those who were lazy. Those with better education wanted more. Wealthy tribes did not want to share with the poorest tribes. Tribal loyalties were always placed before national interest.

Economically, Tanzania is still one of the poorest countries, despite a massive infusion of foreign aid. It began with absolutely no industry and only 4% of the land arable. *Ujamaa* policies, while stressing self-reliance, discouraged foreign investment. The education debate was to give each child

4 years of schooling or half the children 8 years. There was no money for more. Imported items were highly taxed because hard currency was scarce. But a U.S. government study concluded that people had no incentive to work if there was nothing to buy. Industrious people had no incentive to do more. What little industry was started was inefficient, labor intensive, and non-competitive. So the debate goes on as to what economic system really best helps the vast majority of people. This is not unrelated to our own economy and values which are much more complicated.

In my classes, I use films and case studies to give the students some sense of seeing the world through the eyes of others. But nothing compares to the firsthand experience of living in another culture and experiencing with the people their joys and hopes, their anxieties and fears. Mount St. Joseph College should be commended for its program.

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MARY BECKMAN

*Associate Director, Academic Affairs and Research, Center for Social Concerns
Concurrent Associate Professor, Economics and Policy Studies
University of Notre Dame*

The kinds of experiences that Trokan hopes students will have through the college's immersion courses develop a certain story line. After some multidisciplinary preparation, students enter into the realities of people who differ from themselves in substantive ways; engagement ensues; students reconsider their own stories in light of the new ones they have encountered; they consider in systematic and disciplinarily informed ways how this experience might influence who they will become.

To enter into the reality of those who are significantly unlike themselves, students must put their own biases, judgments, even values aside. They need to be open-eyed and open-hearted, non-defensive, and approach with a spirit of dialogue.

The development of this capacity to engage the dissimilar story of another is a valuable, if not essential capacity if one is to help create a more just

world. Increasingly, and in so many forms, diversity characterizes our world. How can students help bring about peace and justice if they cannot come to terms with the ways that people in the developing world are unlike themselves? How can they develop compassion if they cannot recognize, and then relinquish, subjectivity enough to grasp something of the lives of children who are poor or persons with physical disability?

Unlike most student immersions, my own mini-immersion into Trokan's essay seems more one with sameness than with difference. Much of what is happening at Trokan's college is akin to our work at the Center for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame. Fundamentally, we, too, offer interdisciplinary courses through which students travel beyond campus to invest themselves in civic participation.

As I read Trokan's essay, I indeed also see differences between the community-based learning efforts at Mount St. Joseph and our own. And just as we hope our students will reconsider their own views and choices in light of their immersion course encounters, I attempt to allow Trokan's words to help me rethink what we do.

I am inspired by the use of the Sisters of Charity mission. We have a mission statement, derived through a lengthy collaborative process. Furthermore, we refer regularly to a part of the University's mission statement, as a charge for our work: "the University seeks to cultivate in its students...a disciplined sensibility to the poverty, injustice and oppression that burden the lives of so many. The aim is to create a sense of human solidarity and concern for the common good that will bear fruit as learning becomes service to justice" (University of Notre Dame, 2005, para. 8).

I find the description of Elizabeth Seton's life, however, and the resulting principles to contain a sensibility that we do not articulate. In particular, I am drawn to the Sisters of Charity's notions of "loving trust shaping all our relationships,...risk[ing] being prophetic in church and society," and being part of a "journey together toward wholeness" (Trokan, 2005, p.136). The language here is compelling; I will take it back to our staff.

Mount St. Joseph fosters a model that adds on a service-learning credit to standard courses. This is something we have avoided. From our experience, this approach can all too easily result in service experience that is not well integrated into a course and thus does not render the pedagogical benefits that could otherwise be obtained. We emphasize community engagement as integral to the coherence of a class. Furthermore, we want to make it clear that community-based learning can be done within three-credit offerings, as these dominate in our institution; we want community-based learning to be viewed as mainstreamable.

Our emphasis on Catholic social tradition seems to play a role similar to that of contextual theology at Mount St. Joseph. We understand Catholic

social tradition to “[take] into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people” (Bevans, 1992, p. 1) as does contextual theology. We ask students to consider, for example, the applicability of principles of Catholic social teaching, such as solidarity, in all our seminars. We would benefit, however, by exploring contextual theology in particular as it also takes into account “the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change in that culture” (p. 1).

Finally, we would do well to learn from the anthropological framework noted in the essay. Our use of social analysis may approach a similar outcome. Through social analysis, we ask students to consider causes of social challenges as multilevel. For example, we encourage them to identify those problems that can be rectified through changes in individual behavior, as well as those that require changes in systems, laws, and institutions.

At the Center for Social Concerns, we talk a good bit about how we might build conditions for peace in all we do. Trokan’s essay reminds me that approaching others with openness and desire for mutual exchange is a good regular step in the walk toward peace and justice.

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BRIAN M. GREEN

*Assistant Coordinator, Beyond Career to Calling, A Lilly Endowment Project
University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota*

I have participated in two immersion-based programs over the course of the last 7 years. In the first program, I was a teacher in Montgomery, Alabama, as part of the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) program teaching middle school religion in a predominantly African-American setting. The second program took place in Santiago, Chile, where I taught English as a second language. In both of the programs, I was part of an intentional faith community with members that were also engaged in the same service. These programs have played such a significant role in defining my life and faith that Trokan’s article resonated with me in several ways. I have to admit that I

have a very biased opinion, but I think all students should participate in immersion-based education, especially in Catholic schools and universities.

In Catholic education's quest to make a lasting impact on our students and our world, immersion based programs should be part of curricula across the country. Current trends make it very difficult for students not to have an individualistic approach to their lives and education. People have become comfortable consuming rather than giving in an unintentional selfishness that is reinforced over and over in society. Programs such as the Mount St. Joseph program begin to give students the opportunity to step out of their comfort zones and engage a new perspective on service to others. It allows students to interact with the world around them and become more culturally competent and confident. As Trokan states, it prepares students to be future leaders.

As I read the article, I was reminded of a saying I heard long ago, "When students hear, they forget; when they see, they remember; and when they do, they understand." That was in the forefront of my thoughts because it is so focused on students taking action.

With regard to programs grounded in faith such as Catholic schools and universities, we are able to see students taking right action. When students believe in something, they act. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. Applying that thought to faith formation, how do we engage students in religion and theology classes so their belief creates action? The Mount Plus One option gives us one model. By providing the opportunity for students to serve as part of their academic experience, the program allows students to grasp a deeper understanding of their faith, hence, a deeper understanding of life and purpose. This is the essence of a vocation.

With the stated goal of creating "leaders, citizens, and disciples" the clear challenge for the program is forming a correct lens for the student to engage and process the experience. Is the program grounded in the Catholic faith? How do we prepare the soil for students to participate in the program and develop their faith in the process? How do we make certain that a student's compassion and sense of justice are grounded in their faith? Are students able to connect the action to their Catholic identity?

From my experience with immersion-based programs, the actual service is the most important component in creating a sense of mission. If the mission does not inspire action, the call will go unanswered. The mission of developing leaders, citizens, and disciples is good, but is it explicit enough to inspire students to continue to grow after the service experience? Does it create meaning for their lives and those around them? Does it give enough direction about what the program is striving for in the world? Does it show students how to be leaders, citizens, and disciples in the world? These are questions that must be addressed fully throughout the courses.

In addition to serving abroad and throughout the country, I think there needs to be more engagement in local communities. It is easy for a student to process his or her immersion experience and not connect it to the everyday world. Students need to have the mentality of “our world” and “our reality.” For Catholic schools that means engaging in the community around the school. The challenge for the teachers and administrators is to create the connection with the community so the school becomes a vital component serving in a variety of ways.

The Trokan article tells the story of one particular program at one particular school. It shows a willingness that needs to be replicated at other universities and Catholic schools around the country to engage our students’ faith formation by creating meaning. It shows that there is an ever increasing awareness to bring students back into relationships and service to others for the common good.