

## *Original Paper*

# Karma and Yoga: Transformative Pedagogy and Empowering Communities through Study Abroad and Service Learning

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### ***Abstract***

*International education and global citizenship are keywords in our culture today and the success or failure of our attempts to be global citizens depends on the level of commitment we are able to make to cultures different than our own. The academic study of transnational feminism rests on the idea that cultural knowledge can be learned and appreciated. Studying abroad is a small step towards fostering global citizenship and transnational solidarity. This essay illustrates some of the successes of and impediments to community formation and global awareness through study abroad programs and initiatives. Service-learning assessment modules, non-traditional assignments, and stimulation of contemplative health are presented as pedagogical examples that make possible a mutually life-transforming experience for educators and students alike.*

### ***Keywords***

*international education, study abroad, community, feminism, service-learning*

### **1. Introduction**

Popular culture of recent decades has provided our national fetish for global citizenship with plenty of inspiration. Movies, books, and blogs engender cultural exchange and knowledge even if some cultural forms of communication (like proverbs and humor) are practically untranslatable across cultures. International education and global citizenship are keywords in our culture today and the success or failure of our attempts to be global citizens depends on the level of commitment we are able to make to cultures different than our own. The academic study of transnational feminism rests on the idea that cultural knowledge can be learned and appreciated. Studying abroad is a small step towards fostering global citizenship and transnational solidarity.

Study abroad opportunities have also received much criticism: This essay will illustrate some of the successes of and impediments to community formation and global awareness through study abroad programs and initiatives. Service-learning assessment modules, non-traditional assignments, and stimulation of contemplative health are presented as pedagogical examples that make possible a mutually life-transforming experience for educators and students alike. In the next three sections of this essay I will elaborate on specific ways in which study abroad fosters global community. The first part of this essay will focus on the politics and problematics of women's studies abroad. Here I will delve into how I tailored my course curriculum to mirror the efforts of our host organization in India so that my study abroad program could dovetail with some of the outreach activities that the Indian non-governmental organization Navdanya (9 Seeds) was already engaged in and had already implemented at the grassroots level. The second part of this essay will highlight some of the complexities of "translating" gender paradigms in India for a group of college-aged American students. In this section I will briefly illustrate some of the tensions of teaching academic feminism in the US classroom context and teaching feminism in practice in the study abroad context. The final section of this essay will contextualize what is meant by transnational feminist pedagogy in order to illustrate how study-abroad environments are fruitful for thinking through questions about global citizenship and belonging. Communities created through study abroad encourage all participants (teachers and students) to confront and address shared structures of experiences and feelings in contradistinction to and across national boundaries. In order to transgress the binaries of "us" versus "them", teacher versus student, the privileged versus the disenfranchised, each of us had to sacrifice personal comforts and live with, alongside, and in cooperation with those very communities that we sought to understand and empower. Indeed, cultures are for the claiming, but only if we have a commitment to those cultures—otherwise our claiming would be nothing but an exoticization of cultural practice.

### *1.1 Introduction*

Among the primary reasons I was drawn to the discipline of women's studies were a sense of community, the opportunity therein to find a group of colleagues who would be mutually supportive, and because, more often than not, the discipline fosters safe spaces for the small, individual voices often left out of mainstream social discourse and interactions. In many ways then, one might argue that self-reflexivity and social empowerment are twin ideals at the very core of the discipline of women's studies. Given this incredible set of paradigms I enthusiastically set forth to Northern India with twenty [University name] students to study at Navdanya Biodiversity and Conservation Farm in Dehradun, India.

Dehradun is in the Uttarakhand Valley of the Himalayan foothills, about ten hours north of New Delhi. It is in close proximity to several important pilgrimage sites for Hindus and Buddhists, and it is an area with a great environmental diversity. The city of Dehradun is one hour from the hill-station Mussoorie (location of the famous Woodstock School and the Landaur Language Institute), 40 minutes from the famous Transcendental Meditation Ashram in Rishkesh (home of the Beatles when they came to India)

and 15 minutes from the Mindrolling Tibetan Monastery and the Wildlife Institute of India. The Indo-Tibetan border is 3 hours north of Dehradun and as such the city is also a strategic center for the Indian military. The main campus of Navdanya is situated on a lush 40 acres and consists of a small-scale model farm, two soil and water testing labs, a centralized dining facility, a small catering kitchen, ten dormitory-style rooms, and two thatched huts, which accommodate 4 guests each. There are four bathrooms with running water (cold only) and toilets that are shared among the dormitories. The huts have their own bathroom and one of the 10 dormitory rooms—designated as the research-scholar room, has its own bathroom. The campus also has a large lecture hall, a conference room and library, and a large gazebo where meditation, yoga, and other social activities are held.

Of the twenty students enrolled in my women's studies course, only four had formal coursework in women's studies prior to embarking on the study abroad program. Most of them came from working class family backgrounds. None of them spoke Indian languages nor had any formal training in South Asian Studies. However, they were all in better shape than me—nearly all of them were active hikers, and many of the female students had taken a yoga-for-fitness class. All of the students were interested in learning about veganism, environmental politics, and international development. In India these differences in political values or class backgrounds did not matter. As a group we were foreigners and treated like outsiders. Once a week when we left the idyllic and quiet Navdanya campus to go to Dehradun city to do our shopping or to send emails to friends and family, we were met with public stares. I could tell that the students were growing increasingly uncomfortable with their power as Americans, often at the expense of local men and women. Yet, when they were sick, doctors made house calls and held their hands while they recovered. As Americans we had access to historical monuments and sights that locals had to wait in long lines to see; we also had to pay ten times the local price. We became objectified and gawked at as we walked through the crowded bazaars and streets; everyone wanted photos with us. Yet for those who did not speak the language, forming real personal connections with local people was nearly impossible. It was difficult to blend in and experience India as a resident "Indian" would; yet we were not simply privileged outsiders either.

This study abroad program was perhaps one of my most rewarding teaching experiences. It was rewarding because I got to experience the "light-bulb" moments of each and every student—that moment when connections between theory and practice are made through lived experience. Lack of media (cellphones, email, television, internet, etc.) forced students to engage class material and generate dialogue with other members of the group whom they may have otherwise not engaged; communal living created opportunities for in-depth outside class discussions on a variety of topics; and finally, students learned first-hand lessons on personal and collective empowerment.

As a result of this shared living-learning community setup, I found that students asked insightful questions about required readings for the course but also sound ways to interject their own life-struggles in dialogue with the theoretical models posed in the required readings. Generally, they became more engaged in course materials than they might have otherwise been. Many were also able to

apply the work learned in class to their own lives, in many ways “women’s studies” abroad became a life-transforming experience.

Notwithstanding the clash of cultures, students were able to turn their personal experience into a paradigm of social change, beginning first with changing their own habits and lifestyle choices, and then expressing those choices in terms of future academic pursuits and career goals. Students gave up personal comforts that they were accustomed to at home in order to have a true cultural immersion experience. In sum, the scenarios I have just described encapsulate a teacher’s dream situation and one that is rarely experienced *en masse* by the entire class in any given semester on the institution campus at home. These everyday victories motivate and inspire both instructor and student to be introspective and honest about their expectations and frustrations. If transformative pedagogy is about de-centering power relations in the classroom so that learning can happen more organically, or about “interactions between educators and students that foster the collaborative creation of power”, the study abroad context is ripe for this type of faculty-student cooperation and mutual learning (Cummins).

## 2. Research Method

### 2.1 Democracy in Practice

Benjamin Barber, the outspoken political theorist and professor, has argued that, “education is crucial to the life of our democracy [and that] anybody who has been thinking about democracy has to think about education” (London). As a professor who routinely teaches courses on feminism and international studies, I am acutely aware of the fundamental link between power and knowledge—between political enfranchisement and educational opportunities. I spend a great deal of time explaining to students in my courses the relationship between activism and feminism and why the discipline of Women’s Studies is not solely about the theoretical but equally invested in the practical. The discipline not only exposes the tragic, the painful, bitter realities of life but also makes possible the dreams and visions of alternate paradigms and strategies for survival.

Many students in my classes do not know that in the US women did not get the right to vote until the year 1920—which is 144 years after the American Declaration of Independence. Countries like India and Pakistan gave women the right to vote on the very day they were free from British colonialism (1947). Fewer still are aware of the history of the discipline of women’s studies: that the establishment of Women’s Studies departments occurred in the wake of the movements for civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s. Many are surprised to learn that it was not until the early 1980s that women’s contributions to history, education, politics, science, and art became subjects worthy of serious academic study and that degrees were granted for studying these subjects from a gender-sensitive lens. And because the establishment of women’s studies departments in colleges and universities across this country came as a result of women’s activism, the discipline of Women’s Studies has maintained an emphasis on knowledge gained from both activist and academic perspectives.

I say all of this because it was not simply fortuitous coincidence that my transnational feminist pedagogy mirrored Navdanya's mission to empower local communities—I picked Navdanya as a site for hosting the study abroad program in India precisely because the curriculum I wanted to teach in the classroom mirrored the activism of Navdanya. Navdanya is a non-governmental organization that is heavily invested in the local communities in and around the city of Dehradun—their educational outreach is vast and their work to empower the youth populations of surrounding communities is impressive and extensive. Dr. Vandana Shiva, the world-renowned environmentalist, founded Navdanya in 1987 in the wake of the Union Carbide Plant Bhopal disaster of 1984 because she wanted to teach the rural communities in the Himalayan foothills about pesticide independence. Shiva's work on women, ecology, and development made groundbreaking contributions to the field of ecofeminism: linking explicitly the male desire to dominate over nature to patriarchy and women's subjugation (Shiva, 2010). Navdanya's field campus was a good place to teach ideas about gender and international development.

Secondly, this study abroad opportunity provided alternate paradigms and rich strategies for teasing out the historic gap between feminist organizing and academic feminism (Hartman et al. 1992). By this I mean that students were able to engage in an experiential learning community that constantly challenged their assumptions about power and privilege. Navdanya's mission is mirrored on the work of M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948)—the assertion that each person must be the agent of social change; that true freedom and equality can only be achieved through selfless labor and the discipline of action (karma-yoga). This pivot was crucial for teaching ideas about self-transformation and global consciousness.

Thirdly, students learnt to ask tough questions about the relationship between feminist pedagogy and internationalizing the curriculum initiatives that is all the rage in colleges and universities across the United States today. Indeed, we are seeing more and more demand for internationalizing the curriculum and global consciousness. One needs to ask at this important historical moment if these new measures for international education are backed by a commitment to empowering those very communities that host our projects of internationalization. Our students began to think about whom internationalizing the curriculum initiatives benefited and how they could work in tandem with local organizations that supported democratic values.

As a teacher I was proud of the contributions my students made to the communities we visited in India—we did not just visit these places as tourists; rather, we engaged communities as if we were a part of them. As Pipitone notes in her essay about the importance of “place” in pedagogy, “educators can adapt the intentions and practices of their programs to embrace the pedagogical potential of place to foster the renegotiation of representations and heightened relationality” (Pipitone). But this is not easy especially if power and privilege hierarchies are not understood or internalized.

It is my sincere belief that our initiatives to internationalize the curriculum can indeed showcase Americans abroad as exemplars of multiculturalism, generosity, and ambassadorship, but this can only happen if we are introspective about our own privileges and work consciously to not wield them—at least not intentionally. After all, if there is one thing that encompasses transnational feminist pedagogy and practice, it is to understand the relation between the local and the global and how one is contingent on and complicated by the other.

The study abroad experience opened up a transformative living and working environment that touched and motivated every participant. In organizing, directing, and teaching in India for six weeks I learned several things about myself as an academic. Indeed, this was one of the most difficult things I have ever done as a teacher: to manage twenty students in their late-teens and early-twenties as we traveled through a dozen communities in rural and urban North India. For many of the students who came to India this was their first time outside of the United States, for some, it was their first time outside of the state of [insert state name], and for two of them it was their first time on a plane! Emotions ran high and low, and oftentimes students began to treat me more like a parent than a teacher.

Yet I am acutely aware of the fact that what I did was not unique because for many women and men across the globe, community organizing or community building is an integral part of their day-to-day life; something that they do because they were inspired; because it is done in the spirit of generosity and comradeship.

### *2.2 Translating Gender Differences: “This is Not Summer Camp”*

The most difficult part of taking a group of college students to a country like India was the noticeable gender differences between the way in which Indian and American social life is organized. India is still very much a society where there are socially acceptable roles for women to play in the public sphere, and day-to-day life for men and women is organized along the axis of gender. This is particularly true in rural India where gender roles are discrete and segregated. While in urban centers like New Delhi (India’s capital city), Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, etc. these lines are blurred by corporate and cosmopolitan agendas, at Navdanya and in Dehradun that was not the case.

An important slogan of the women’s movement, “the personal is the political”, took center stage in our lives while in India. Oft misinterpreted, the slogan as coined and used during the second-wave feminist movement in the US, served as a battle hymn for women’s organizing. As Carol Hanisch—credited with coining the term—explains the term’s origin: “It came out of a movement (the Women’s Liberation Movement) and a specific group within that movement (New York Radical Women) and a specific group of women within New York Radical Women” (Hanisch).

Faced with the obvious gender differences in India, my feminist students struggled to understand that curbing one’s personal choices was not tantamount to political disenfranchisement. As a teacher I rarely have to deal with telling my students what they can and cannot do outside of the classroom; I never have to deal with what they wear to class or outside of class—it never comes up in a traditional classroom setting. Yet, in India I was responsible for my students both in the classroom and outside it. I

struggled to explain why women could not wander away from our group into the mountains by themselves; being able to go where one wants to go was not the sole marker of women's liberation. I had to learn this for myself and it is after many years of travel to India that I am able to reconcile with this reality.

Some of the gender differences in Indian culture and acceptable gender roles for men and women were often explained away by the students simply as a result of differences in "American" versus "Indian" values and norms. Yet, no one was completely satisfied with this kind of translation of gender experience. It was tough for American students to relate to gender segregation in social life, and to learn that having distinct roles for men and women did not automatically translate to gender oppression in and of itself. Yet they were surprised to learn, for example, that the majority of farmers in India are women and that the majority of cooks in India—including on our farm—were men. Rather than reducing gendered division of labor in the public and private spheres to women's oppression, they learned that it is the way in which these gendered roles become loaded with value—paid labor versus unpaid labor; respectable work versus demeaning work, and so on—that marks oppression. Ethnicity, religion, class, caste, and sexuality are other ways in which women's and men's labor gets marked in India. This was something that they learnt first-hand.

Women students also began to recognize the freedoms they enjoyed in India: for some it was their ability to let go of consumerist practices—of doing their hair every day in order to feel attractive; or feeling the need to wear make-up. Male students became attuned to the subtleties of their gaze and what that might mean in an Indian context. They realized that making eye contact with women they passed on the street suddenly made them feel self-conscious and embarrassed. These are experiences that the students were not able to process immediately and speak articulately about but I am sure, in time, they will be able to reflect on these moments as raising their global and gender consciousness a hundred-fold.

If in-fact "yoga is action, not reaction" as our yoga teacher in India was fond of exclaiming, transformation happens through sustained contemplative practice, and yoga is one of the most salient example of it. We all became aware of the direct link between our personal choices and the consequences of those choices on our salubrity. If the personal is political, as feminists believe they indeed are, "contemplative practice works on the human psyche to shape attention into a far suppler instrument, one that can appreciate a wide range of world-views and even sustain the paradoxes of life" (Zajonc 2). Karma yoga as a transformative practice for self-empowerment and social improvement should resonate well with transnational feminists, social-justice activists, and practitioners of contemplative sciences like yoga and meditation.

For both my students and myself, waking up at 6:30am and doing yoga while the sun rose slowly across the Himalayan foothills gave structure and new definition to our day. In the yoga classroom, I was also a student, no different (and in many cases less qualified) than the other students in class. I grunted and suffered alongside my students in trying to learn yoga, and it was experiences like this that

cultivated mutual respect between teacher and student, and strengthened cross cultural and intergenerational bonding.

### *2.3 Building Communities at Home and Abroad*

In the final part of my essay I will briefly address the community building aspect of study abroad programs. Aside from teaching gender differences in Indian social life the second most trying aspect of the [University name] India study-abroad program was learning to live in a community—a true community where one eats together, lives together, plays together, and studies together. Twenty-four hours a day/seven days a week was difficult not just for the students but for the teachers as well. The instructors on this program lived alongside our students, we ate meals with them, we did yoga together with the students, and even our down time activities like shopping, laundry, cleaning, and so forth were done together. It took us six weeks before we achieved a sustainable routine of living and learning together. And just when we had achieved our community, the program was over and our self-made community had to end.

Upon returning to the United States I began to think about the ways in which our students traveling abroad would be better served if they had had prior experience in communal living; if culture shock could be mitigated with a sense of community support. We began to wonder how we might enhance their educational and professional training overseas through intensive language training—indeed many of the students on the study abroad trip began to study Hindi informally through teach-yourself Hindi study guides and in conversations with local farm workers. If they had some sense of Indian history, social life, religious life, and political life before venturing on the journey that would take them half way across the globe, away from their families and loved-ones, would they have been able to adapt more easily? While we held three to four orientation meetings prior to leaving for India, many of our pre-departure meetings were about the logistics of travel to a “distant” or “foreign” country and not about any of the other issues addressed above.

### **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, I wanted to address my most recent strategy for creating community in a traditional classroom context. Following the study abroad experience, I had the privilege of developing a service-learning module in my home institution centered around the theme of food justice. The sixty students enrolled in the course were required to participate in a volunteering opportunity with a community organization of their choosing devoted to alleviating food insecurity, promoting social justice, or promoting sustainability. The only conditions were the number of required volunteer hours: forty hours over the course of the semester. While the students were overwhelmed at first about the logistics of getting to their volunteer site and finding their work rewarding, or whether they would even be able to finish the requisite hours by the end of the term, I found that each and every student managed to successfully navigate these stumbling blocks. And more, they did so with such positivity and optimism that it reaffirmed my own commitment to making civic engagement an explicit part of my



transnational feminist pedagogy. Community development and community organizing have been crucial aspects of the movements for women's rights and social justice. It was clear that through engaging in this service-learning opportunity, students recognized this as well. This type of knowledge cannot be learned through theory, through books and lesson plans. It is imbibed and embraced through experience and practice. While this was not a study-abroad experience, it was an opportunity that took students outside of their comfort zones, and outside of the confines of the traditional university space into the community of which they are a vital part. Building on the ideas of karma-yoga, (discipline of action) I facilitated opportunities for students to transgress assumptions of their power and privilege, and work side-by-side with community partners from whom they could also learn. I will end this essay with a quote from bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). Her words are offered here at the close of my essay without foreclosing the possibilities that they engender: ... the academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (207)

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