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Learning in the Palaver Hut: The ‘Africa Study Visit’ as teaching tool.

Abstract

The aim of this article is to assess the experiential learning environment of the African Study Visit (ASV). It presents a theoretically grounded analysis of the ASV. Although field visits are not a new phenomenon within Higher Education, they seem, but with few exceptions, to be considered as an add-on teaching method. By drawing from the experiential learning literature, we demonstrate that there are sound pedagogical reasons for incorporating field visits like the ASV into the curriculum as stand-alone components. Thus, the original contribution of this article is to place the ASV within the experiential learning literature such that the theoretical, practical and conceptual benefits for students are understood. Its significance is that this article offers a set of practices from an experiential learning perspective that can be used for deepening the levels of comprehension of political issues in Africa for international studies students.

Keywords

Africa, politics, study visit, teaching

Introduction and theory

The aim of this article is to assess the experiential learning environment of the African Study Visit (ASV). It presents a theoretically grounded analysis of the ASV, a type of study visit. What becomes apparent within pedagogical literature is that visits similar to the ASV are not as common as might be expected (see Higgins et al., 2012; Sachau et al., 2010; Scarce, 1997; Tan and Chew, 2014; Wright, 2000). Although field visits are not a new phenomenon within Higher Education, they seem, but with few exceptions, to be considered as an add-on teaching method. Thus, they are usually treated as an accompanying innovation to more conventionally run modules (Barbezat and Bush, 2014: 191– 196; Cooper et al., 2010). However, in an era when university admissions are increasingly competitive, more substantive forms of study visit are under greater consideration as a means of attracting students. But there are also

sound pedagogical reasons for incorporating field visits like the ASV into teaching practice. Thus, the original contribution of this article is to place the ASV within the experiential learning literature such that its theoretical, practical and conceptual benefits for students are understood. Its significance is that it offers a set of practices from an experiential learning perspective that can be used for teaching Africa within international studies.

By way of clarification, this article makes no attempt to investigate the effect of the visit on the African institutions and individuals who agree to be interviewed or the local assistants who provide the essential support in assembling and propagating the visit, except on the many occasions where the responses, interpretations and attitudes encountered impinge on and furnish evidence for the learning of the students. An investigation of this nature may be the subject of a different paper. Instead, this article seeks to look primarily at three visits in the years 2011–2014 and assess the experiential learning that has taken place, with respect to the relevant pedagogical literature and in the context of the African environment and politics.

Case studies presented throughout this article constitute full, stand-alone modules which are assessed similarly to other classroom-based learning. The learning experience could be partially compared to that of the 'students exchange' (Eide, 1970) or 'student placement programmes' (Cooper et al., 2010). However, the most important differences between these opportunities are the purpose, learning aims and objectives, which in the case of the ASV are quite specific and link directly to the study of African politics. Traditionally, during study visits, cultural differences, intercultural communication or application of the field experience to future 'work place' is looked at only through the lens of relevance to the political processes taking place in a particular country. Needless to say, the ASV also stands in contrast to the numerous and popular volunteering and philanthropic initiatives on the African continent.

In summary, the article will present a theoretically grounded analysis of the ASV. The article is separated into a theoretical discussion, a consideration of four areas of practicalities and their relation to pedagogical theory with appropriate examples and, finally, a look at four political concepts within the notion of experiential learning, again with examples.

What is the ASV?

The ASV is an annually organised visit of between 10 and 20 postgraduate students to an African post-conflict country that typically lasts 2 weeks. The choice of the country is '*decided each year – bearing in mind safety and security priorities, as well as cost implications for the students*' (John and Elnora Ferguson Centre for African Studies (JEFICAS), n.d.). Since the main objective of the ASV is to 'allow students to broaden and deepen their understanding and practical experience of the complexities involved in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction in Africa', the countries that are chosen as the destination of the visit need to fit the description of post-conflict environments. Consequently, in recent years, the ASV has been organised to Sierra Leone (2008 and 2014), Kenya (2009), Uganda (2010), Rwanda (2011 and 2012), Liberia (2013) and Ethiopia (2015).

For some students, particularly those wishing to work for international donor

agencies, the ASV represents an opportunity to obtain answers to the perplexing questions of post- conflict African countries. Our mantra is that you will have had a particularly successful visit if you come home with more questions than when you left. We are thus very pleased to receive this sort of feedback:

The ASV 'was able to create an enabling space for the students, allowing them to express their real thoughts and at the same time stimulate them to read between the lines and critically engage with the multiple realities presented by the different actors; the daily connection between the content of the meetings and the academic framework kept the group focused on a multifaceted reflective approach'.

I think I underestimated how overwhelmed I would be with information and conflicting messages. Of course this is part of the challenge of trying to understand such a complex subject.

The ASV builds on popular and practised methods within an experiential learning framework and, more specifically, builds on the concept of utilising field visits in Higher Education practice. Through an experiential learning approach, teaching philosophy is strengthened by providing a 'thread that joins many of the learning theories in a more unified whole' (Beard and Wilson, 2006: 16). At the same time, this relatively simple definition needs to be problematised, specifically in the context of the discussed case study. The two most important questions which underpin this article relate to who the main stakeholders are in the learning process and what they consider to be a learning experience as discussed in Dewey (1938), Bound et al. (1993) and Cuffaro and Robenstine (1995).

In the case of the ASV, all these aspects are taken to the most extreme. Participants of the learning process interact with each other in diverse ways which are rarely available to conventional teachers – students' relationships and the experiences that they encounter are almost entirely outside of the usual classroom setting. In addition, the uniqueness of the learning space is accompanied by the unusual duration of the experience. If properly prepared and executed, a field visit should provide an educator with a distinct opportunity to develop and engage with a reflective learning space (Savin-Baden, 2008: 66–80) that in turn helps to enhance students' skills and abilities to become '*deep learners*' (Skelton, 2005: 171). On a variety of levels and because of a number of different complexities, the ASV promotes understanding of theories learned in the classroom and compels students to apply them to the experienced reality of post-conflict African environments. Additionally, it provides students with an opportunity to develop their technical skills associated with the discipline of social and international sciences. In accordance with the recommendations of Morss and Murray (2005: 99), this fieldwork can especially allow them to develop cognitive skills such as critical awareness, systematic enquiry and observation, problem-solving and analysis and interpretation of data, providing for some a link between Masters and PhD. However, the ASV not only allows students to understand and develop long-term retention of particular concepts but also allows them to experience the realities that some of these ideas create, causing many to question their own perceptions and preconceptions. In this sense, the learning experience is on many levels personal and is highly influenced by the unique past of the individual learner (Bound et al., 1993: 10). The stakeholders thus far are the

students, and their learning experience is broad, complex and related to their prior encounters.

At the same time, it is also imperative to recognise that critical awareness does not develop equally among all students, and their level of engagement can be at times highly difficult. This, alongside the many difficulties encountered in the field, compels organisers to be constantly reflective of day-to-day (if not hour-to-hour) challenges, variations and modifications necessary for achieving a productive and engaging time during the ASV. The study visit itself is then as much an exercise in critical reflection for the seasoned academic as it is for the students. Consequently, the role of the organisers of these visits often becomes blurred and rarely stays within the rigid lines of 'academic tutor' or 'visit facilitator'. In essence, the main role of the organisers of these visits is to effectively synthesise knowledge from any planned or unplanned activity into experiential learning. This means that the role undertaken by the organisers varies from being an academic instructor, role model, mentor, counsellor, outdoor educator and facilitator to at times a guide or a friend. This unique combination of roles requires developing a trust between organiser and learners, on both an individual and a group level, and so makes the former another crucial stakeholder. Practically, it also requires the establishment of ground rules relating to codes of practice, professional integrity, responsibility and standards which will be binding for both learners and organisers (Beard and Wilson, 2006: 74–78). In many ways, this approach allows the establishment of a basic level of power and agency between teachers and students, quite clearly outlining what are the expectations, roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder in the learning process.

Practicalities and learning

Apart from the long period of technical preparations by organisers, which requires dealing with issues of safety, logistics and management, and the sourcing of funds for the visit by the students, there are four main practicalities that underpin a successful ASV: '*purpose, access and possibility*', '*appropriateness and scale*', '*composition of the group*' and '*attitudes and control*'. Experiences in the field are related below and linked to ideas of experiential learning.

Purpose, access and possibility

When constructing an ASV schedule, we need to be mindful of the *purpose* of particular meetings, visits and engagements. It is important to recognise how each point of the programme links to a particular concept or theory that we want students to engage with, how it links to the overall goal of the Study Visit and how in turn all points link to each other, creating one systematic and logical structure. In order to enhance the purpose of particular elements of the programme, starting from the ASV in 2011, organisers adopted a 'themed' approach when constructing the schedule. To each day we assigned one 'theme' that is afterwards filled with meetings relevant to the development of particular topics. Themes can include 'Institutional Reform and Politics', 'Security', 'Natural Resources', 'International Assistance and NGOs', 'Justice and Tradition', 'Regional Relations' or 'Youth and Civil Society'.

Once we define and identify our detailed objectives, we have to deal with the

difficult task of gaining access to particular speakers and institutions that could help us to illustrate specific issues and problems. With the vital support of local assistants, our scheduled meetings usually include government ministers, officials, society leaders, domestic and international civil society activists and staff, academics and other students. Among the most significant issues that organisers need to deal with to gain access to these individuals are providing assurance of our intentions, arranging meetings with appropriate timing, agreeing on specific preparations prior to the visit and, finally, ensuring compliance to particular protocols – from official governmental protocols to specific arrangements like ‘Chatham House Rules’.

An important element that needs to be noted is that very often *possibilities* emerge (usually as a ‘last-minute’ opportunity), to meet with individuals or visit institutions and organisations that were not part of our initial strategic planning. Most often, people who are engaged in creating these opportunities have their own priorities and interests in meeting with an official British student delegation. It is therefore important to measure all emerging possibilities, both in terms of the correctness of our official involvement with the particular speaker and simultaneously as an issue of relevance of the meeting to the student’s education.

Practical Examples:

(1) Africa Study Visit – Liberia 2013

On the basis of individual, often informal research, students are encouraged to propose people that they would like to meet while in Africa. This approach and engagement is important and highly valued by the organisers. However students’ ideas about meeting certain individuals may not be entirely based on academic enquiry but instead on ‘exciting possibilities’. One example of a suggestion coming from students was the proposal to meet with Joshua Milton Blahyi known as ‘*General Butt Naked*’ – a former rebel leader, who is infamous for his claims of a super-power ability that allowed him to fight naked and gain protection from bullets. After the organisers discussed this with students and outlined concerns about the academic value in this meeting, in particular the self-promotional aspect of the potential interviewee and the subsequent request for money, it was not pursued.

(2) Africa Study Visit – Liberia 2013

A few days into our stay in Liberia, we received pieces of incomplete information that suggested one of the politicians or someone from his/her close surroundings had begun to make claims about being responsible for bringing our group to the country. There was significant evidence that this politician was trying to use our presence to raise his/her own image and improve his/her problematic international profile. In order to resolve this situation we considered and consequently implemented strong action to cut all contacts with this individual.

(3) Africa Study Visit – Sierra Leone 2014

After visiting the Constitutional Review Committee (CRC), an article appeared in the hard copy and online editions of a local newspaper claiming that the leader and students ‘gave much credibility to the CRC and endorsed the process for being introduced at the right time. They also ... applauded the Government of Sierra Leone for not interfering with the process’ (Kamara, 3 March 2014). Of course, none of this was the case and we can only speculate as to motives.

The preceding examples show that a high degree of flexibility of scheduling is

required. In addition, these encounters provided ample evidence for reflection on facets of Liberian and Sierra Leonean politics and media and the position of the researcher. First, the usage of outsiders for political purposes, part of what Bayart (2000) calls 'extraversion', becomes apparent. Liberian and Sierra Leonean political actors have a long history of this practice through the Cold War era and into the realm of post-Cold War aid. Second, the notions that the researcher makes particular choices of whom to interview and that he or she may affect the field of research are highlighted.

This experience also links to a very important question concerning experiential learning: whether learning can happen through 'unplanned activity'. In the context of the Study Visit, we have observed that if students are prepared for the fact that unplanned events may happen, they adjust their expectations and are more willing to go out of their usual comfort zones to explore new ideas and perspectives. Unleashing student's curiosity, by pointing out different elements and consequently allowing students to notice things which were previously hidden from them, is at the heart of the ASV experience. At the end of the visit, student's perception of the African context is informed by numerous meaningful experiences, both planned and unplanned, with the second being often identified by students themselves (Jarvis, 1987: 77–85). More importantly, by the end of the module, students may be more capable of not only actively noticing these activities but also able to respond to them, strengthening their own ability of self-directed learning (Beard and Wilson, 2006: 110).

Appropriateness and Scale

The organisation and conduct of meetings in Africa in many cases are 'hit and miss'. Irrespective of how much preparation and discussion we may have with particular speakers and organisations prior to the meeting about how it will be conducted, the reality of the meeting often creates unexpected and culturally challenging conditions. These conditions usually require organisers and participants of the ASV to behave with an extraordinary level of behavioural *appropriateness*. Similarly, the *scale* of particular engagement and even the physical setting can be more or less suitable depending on situations and the purpose of the meeting.

Practical Examples:

(1) Africa Study Visit – Rwanda 2011

One of the most unexpected situations among all Study Visits, where a group of 17 students had to demonstrate an extreme level of behavioural appropriateness, was during our visit to Ruhengeri Demobilisation and Reintegration Centre in Rwanda. After numerous organisational arrangements and the briefing that students received subsequent to their arrival in the Centre, we were informed that in order to enhance our engagement during this meeting students would be divided into five smaller groups and each group would have an opportunity to talk with a smaller group of ex-combatants. It was never mentioned either to the organisers or to the students that before these group meetings, the entire group would be seated on a huge stage for approximately 45 minutes, in front of two hundred ex-combatants singing and welcoming them in to the Centre. This situation highlighted cultural differences, both between the students and the Rwandan hosts, and within the group itself. Whilst Nigerian and Ugandan students were not embarrassed by the situation, German and Japanese

students felt that they were out of their comfort zones by being made the centre of attention. The differing cultural responses to the situation caused a lot of friction and discussions within the student group, which in turn took considerable time for the organisers to resolve.

(2) Africa Study Visit – Sierra Leone 2014 & Rwanda 2011

On several occasions, it was either the case that an interviewee would claim on our arrival to be unaware of the appointment but would then acquiesce to the interview anyway (e.g. one particular Sierra Leonean government ministry); or that an interview scheduled for example with the chair would develop into a meeting with almost all post-holders in the organisation, creating more of a committee-style occasion, often in a cramped and hot environment (e.g. the Sierra Leone Bike Riders Union). Flexibility on the side of the interviewees needs to be anticipated in order to be matched by flexibility on the side of the students. To enable positive flexibility within student groups it is important that meetings are preceded by group discussion where potential scenarios on how the meeting may unfold can be analysed and 'coping strategies' put in place. A good example of the success of this approach can be seen in the meeting with the President of Rwanda in 2011. The group were pre-prepared for the strict protocols dictated by the President's Office and the very specific agreements about the questions which were to be asked on behalf of the group. However, when in the end the President altered the format of the meeting, because the students had thought through and prepared more questions, they were able to confidently respond to the change and make effective use of the changed opportunity.

In turn, these examples demonstrate the high degree of flexibility required of the students or researcher. Pedagogically, it can be noted that notions of timeliness and order may be relative and worthy of analysis in themselves, but also that there is often an importance attached to the visit of the researchers. It is, however, key to note that the latter is not always the case, and the most recent ASV to Ethiopia in 2015 was much less striking in this aspect, perhaps to some extent due to the rather 'arms-length' attitude to the outside world that the Ethiopian government has adopted in the last two and a half decades.

The ability of the group and individuals to utilise opportunities linked to the changed or unexpected setting usually relates to the emotional ability of students and the level of their engagement with the environment in which the particular situation occurs. In this way, intellectual and emotional reactions can in themselves be a site of learning. Here, the role of the leaders of the visit with the help of local assistants becomes especially crucial as they not only need to make quick decisions about conduct and 'appropriateness', but they also need to be able to communicate very clear and precise guidelines to students. The perceived intensity of the change within the activity can be reduced, and as soon as cultural sensitivity is tackled in a similar way, students' disposition to learn can be restored (Parr, 2000). Of course, students need to be provided with the space where they can properly analyse and discuss their emotions which were involved in a particular action, creating at the same time a space for critical reflections (see the 'Palaver Hut' discussion below).

Composition of the group

In the case of student participants, the most crucial ASV issues are usually around unequal knowledge about and experience of Africa and communication issues that sometimes arise due to a highly culturally and nationally diverse group of students. Surprisingly, quite often lines between these groups cannot be easily defined. It is not always a question of some students having more knowledge or experience of Africa than others. It is rather an issue of being able to recognise that each student engages with problems on a different level and in a different way, often communicating or not communicating different issues in their own way. Additionally, as a consequence of the profound scale of problems in which students are immersed during their time in Africa, organisers are often confronted with significant shifts in student's perceptions of the world and their own role in it. This process often links to emotional reactions that need to be very carefully and on individual bases monitored and reacted upon.

Practical Example:

(1) Africa Study Visit – Liberia 2013

During the Liberian Study Visit a group of nineteen students consisted of: two German students, one French, one New Zealander, one American, one Argentinian, one British, one Liberian, and eleven Japanese. This composition, and especially the large number in the Japanese contingent, posed a number of challenges both to the organisers and students themselves. As a consequence, and as a way to bring and enhance engagement of Japanese students, organisers found themselves linking to Japanese philosophical concepts in order to relate them to issues of corruption and lobbying which emerged during discussions.

More flexibility on the part of the organisers is again required. However, just as important are the pedagogical imperatives, where students can learn from each other of their reactions to the field environment and of their own experiences and culture related to a particular subject. Through the years, we have observed that 'cultural distance' (Eide 70:128), which can be understood as the sum of all differences between the students' culture and the culture of visited countries, is significant in how well students accommodate to their environment. However, in this aspect, it is also important to note the uniqueness of this particular experience. Study visit and teaching literature customarily looks at each of these elements separately, discussing issues relating to 'peer support', 'learning space' and 'cultural sensitivity' (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Race, 2001). In the case of the ASV, all these elements merge into one, creating a prone environment for disagreements and at times for conflicts between students. The main tool used in resolution of similar differences between students is 'group discussion' (Bligh, 1986), with an important role for a facilitator who ensures that each party has space to be heard. In the context of the Study Visit, discussion is considered the most effective teaching method as it allows teachers to fully understand to what extent students comprehend and feel about the new and often culturally unfamiliar knowledge and experiences that they encounter. It is very often during the discussion time and most significantly by listening to others speak that students try to link encountered situations to prior knowledge and individual experiences. The

power of this process when accompanied by the linking of students' observations to theoretical literature on a particular subject is a striking example of students' ability to shape their own learning experience (see again the 'Palaver Hut' discussion below).

Control and attitudes

This problem can be understood as part of a technical question of the degree of freedom students can be allowed in order to have the opportunity to confront their own perceptions and attitudes towards the post-conflict African environment. It is noticeable that student feedback often recommends that greater contact with 'normal people' is desirable, but this question does not have a simple and explicit answer and depends very much on the levels of insecurity, particularly in the environs of the accommodation and visited places, and what exactly is meant by 'normal people'. However, also fundamental to the Study Visit is the attempt within the schedule to create and contextualise the diversity of student experiences and to support the development of their awareness of the complexity of the problems, people and environment that they are engaging with.

Practical Example:

(1) Africa Study Visit – Rwanda
2011

One of the most striking (and partially expected) issues presented by the 2011 Rwandan Study Visit was the observations that students made about the high level of development and improvements in the country so soon after the Genocide. It was especially interesting to observe African students (in this instance from Uganda and Nigeria), drawing parallels between what they saw in Kigali with images from their home countries, especially the rebuilt and clean roads, new buildings, refurbished shops, impressive institutions, and well-organised hospitals etc. In order to provide students with an alternative and more comprehensive picture of Rwanda, half of the visit was organised outside of the capital, in the rural areas in the North and South of the country.

There are lessons here on the comprehensiveness of the visit. In addition, one of the key areas of debate in the field of African politics is the various cleavages in society – in particular those of identity and of the rural–urban divide in post-conflict societies. Equally, the experience may bring forward comparisons with elsewhere on the continent, which highlights the similarities and differences between African countries.

Confrontation of students' perceptions and attitudes is very often linked to the process of 'construction and deconstruction' (Mumford, 1991) of their knowledge about a particular African environment. Although being a core concept of learning, the idea of being part of a similar process within a time-bound and culturally foreign environment is at times difficult for students. This is especially important if observed realities are different from students' own experiences and are different from what they recognise as accepted 'truth' – this is one of the reasons why at times they look for what they conceptualise as 'normal'. Throughout the Visit, knowledge and perceptions of each individual student are being directly challenged. The difference between the intensity of this process depends on the extent to which issues being raised are challenging

students' personal experiences. This is usually explored by having individual discussions with students and by trying to help each individual to go through each stage of the process. At times the journey made by students can fundamentally deconstruct their philosophies, notions and ideas that they had before joining the study visit.

Political concepts, learning and the Palaver Hut

A key component, then, of the ASV is the confluence of theory and reality or, in other words, the application of months of desk-learning to the actual environment. Three points are relevant here before a number of examples are related. First, any pre-conceived ideas which may race headlong into the new environment include those of an academic slant alongside those of a more instrumental nature regarding careers. Most obviously, there are some, most likely many, who would like to work for the United Nations (UN) or some other body within the aid industry. The meetings with these organisations thus confront students directly with the limitations and problems of the aid industry both within itself and in its engagement with the host country. Second, it is then endeavoured to tease out, problematise and provide a forum to talk over the theory–reality terrain and encounters of the day. In Liberia, we instigated a virtual Palaver Hut, named after the place where Liberian communities talk over difficult issues and used as the moniker for the Government of Liberia programme of reconciliation. This involved everyone sitting on the grass under the coconut trees as a group at some point every day, usually at the end, for around an hour. Rules stated that nothing was out of bounds but that equally nothing should leave the Palaver Hut – Chatham House Rules. In 2014, this was repeated on the balcony of our accommodation and named the Barry after a similar Sierra Leonean institution; in Ethiopia in 2015 it was the Adbar.

Third, there are moments when the second point – the forum – cannot adequately address the first – rapid changes in perception. There are many who feel very keenly that their emotional, intellectual and/or career well-being is under considerable threat. In Liberia, we called this an 'existential crisis' to show that we understood the profundity of the situation. Indeed, one student confided, 'I don't know what to think any more'. We endeavoured to counter this problem through one-to-one meetings and generally in the Palaver Hut by emphasising that this is a potentially very positive, if very difficult, process and that it will in all probability be temporary. One needs to deconstruct to be able to re-construct better.

Above and beyond the theoretical and pedagogical issues which emerged in the 'Practicalities and learning' section of the article, four theoretical and practical examples concerning politics are raised here: 'traditional' beliefs, corruption, deference and the aid industry, although of course there are many more.¹ Few are able to define '*traditional beliefs*', let alone have a full grasp of the pre-colonial and colonial derivations and understand the importance of these beliefs and systems to contemporary African society and politics. This is partly so because the literature on this relationship is not so extensive. However, it may also be partly because of the rootedness of students (and many others) in European, American or Japanese value systems. Under Western-style modernisation, African 'traditional' beliefs are anachronistic and indeed already on their way out. Otherwise, and even at the same time, 'tradition' is seen as timeless, set in stone or even homogeneous across the continent. These are often at the least

unquestioned assumptions. We were fortunate in Liberia in 2013 to have one of those unplanned possibilities concerning 'traditional' beliefs. The students were taken to a 'tourist' spot, and our well-informed and approachable Liberian guide explained to us that the hundreds of carp living in a short section of a small stream in immediate range of a sizeable village were able to do so because they were 'magic'. Subsequently, we heard many stories from others about the sacredness and power of the site, the protection given to the fish, the illnesses contracted if one were to consume a fish and, most crucially and most directly political, the manner in which rebel leader and later president, Charles Taylor, enforced these 'codes' during wartime. The animated discussions which thus flowed from this opportune visit crossed theoretical boundaries of religion, modernity, tradition, identity and politics.

Corruption is an extremely broad concept which students have not necessarily deconstructed. Again, this is partly so due to literature, not this time because there is too little literature, but because there is too much, creating a cacophony of definitions and descriptions. The dominance in the grey literature of Transparency International, whose endeavours to quantify corruption are rather limited, does not help. The students are presented with a plethora of examples of corruption: from everyday stories of police bribery; to students complaining of payments to teachers; to the attendance in Liberia at the launch of a children's book, *Gbagba* (Pailey, 2012), concerning corruption; to newspaper exposés of prominent government officials. Indeed, it was frankly admitted in the Liberian Anti-Corruption Commission that the body was toothless and that there was little hope that the vested interests of the legislature would pass any increase in its powers. A very confusing analysis of the origins of corruption was offered to one of the astute students who asked. From these experiences, we were able to break down the idea of corruption and to begin piecing together where the various strands had come from and what made them so virulent in Liberia. As noted before, Japanese notions of corruption were used to illustrate the different ways in which corruption is perceived and actualised in different cultures. As might be expected, this discussion then crossed the boundaries of the idea of the state, political culture and societal perceptions and indeed ambivalence to corruption.

The observation of *deference* emerges in some meetings with officials. The opportunity to meet some of the top officials in a particular country, for instance President Kagame during the Study Visit to Rwanda or the Vice President in Liberia, may appear to students as an 'exciting' privilege. This is hardly surprising as the reverse situation of foreign students meeting, for example, the British prime minister is highly unlikely. They may read and search many sources (often non-academic ones) to find out as much as possible about the person that they will be meeting. Due to the perceived 'uniqueness' of these kind of meetings, and also the information that students manage to dig out about certain individuals, it is important to reiterate the purpose and the probable outcomes and limitations of these meetings. In these situations, the greatest value is not necessarily in the content of the discussions that students may have or within the profundity of the answers that they may receive, but rather in their own ability to observe and experience the context in which these meetings happen. Meeting the Liberian Vice President in 2013 prompted students to question the way in which his subordinates relate to him. They consequently linked this to academic debates on authority and control, which in turn raised questions around political leadership and governance. A

visit to a Paramount Chief's house in Sierra Leone in 2014 threw up issues not only of deference but also of 'tradition', modernity, legitimacy and relationships with the international mining sector. After other similar experiences, students would discuss the level of openness of the political space and how and why the power of particular individuals becomes legitimatised. In turn, they could apply analytical lenses like neo-patrimonialism to their observation of a hierarchical system of 'big-men politics'. Furthermore, the considerable access to people in power granted to students from a British university, sometimes at extremely short notice, raises issues in the ways in which the West is perceived or indeed how Africans receive outsiders generally.

As noted above, a good proportion of students come with ideas of working within the *aid industry* and the peacebuilding programme. Equally, they come with notions that there are problems with aid, but often that these problems can be addressed through adjustments and refinements to the current model. The students meet with a variety of non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff, both domestic and international, some of whom of course come from their own country of origin. Sometimes in larger meetings with Chatham House Rules but more often in smaller more intimate groups, particularly lower rank NGO staff can be quite frank about the problems they encounter. This is a key point at which, first, the students grapple with the complexity of the problems faced by NGOs and, second, can begin to relate these problems to the wider political issues they are encountering, such as 'traditional' beliefs, corruption and deference. The discussion again aims to be multi-dimensional, considering the more obvious issues related to the mechanics of peacebuilding and state-rebuilding, but then tackling the relationship of the aid industry with ideas of universalism, liberalism, African state-society relations and 'extraversion'.

These four conceptual elements were all approached and reacted to differently for a number of structural, organisational and personal reasons which have been broadly out-lined. From the pedagogical perspective, the students are all confronting perceptions, ideas and experiences that each individual has in different ways and with different out-comes. However, very crucial for this process is that the learning cycle in which students are imbedded is, in all these cases, quite similar and consists of four main stages (Buckle, 1988). In the first stage, students are part of and create a particular 'experience' or 'learning event'. Throughout the Study Visits, they are not a mere recipient of knowledge that is 'given to them', but to a great extent they create particular events and situations themselves. Even if they take the role of the observer, they feel that they can always choose to go beyond their passiveness. The existence of possibility, even if not acted upon, changes the nature of the experience by enhancing students' engagement. The second stage is 'reflecting' on particular experiences and is recognised as the most challenging for organisers. This is mainly due to the intensity of the Study Visit, where individual events are happening almost constantly and the reflection time is limited. Because of that, reflection is often merged into the next stage, which is 'generalisation' about the experience. In 2 weeks during the ASV, students share their experience, while jointly with the leaders and their peers they try to 'unpack' and link their individual experiences to bigger issues and concepts.

As the evidence and discussions with our graduates showed, the ASV has a profound impact on many students, even years after the completion of the project. Therefore, the fourth stage of the learning process – 'applying ideas in new situations' – cannot be identified with one experience or individual story.

Depending on the particular career path- ways that graduates choose, they relate to different skills, abilities and experiences. Graduates, however, may take from the ASV life-long lessons that can be utilised in unique circumstances which may be utterly different to African or political contexts.

A note on academic writing and key problems and successes

It is difficult to gauge the effect of the trip on the writing of the students as there is of course no control sample. There is, as might be expected, a range of quality in the essays and there are the usual problems of structure and language. Putting these concerns aside as they are not related to the ASV, it can first be said that in the majority of cases, there is a serious endeavour to illuminate theoretical considerations with evidence gleaned from the field. In this sense, it is preparation for any student planning on furthering their academic life in pursuit of a PhD or entering the world of government or the aid industry, as the majority of these avenues will require fieldwork and written assessments in some form. It is also clear that a majority endeavoured to go beyond a mid-range analysis of procedural problems in peacebuilding to use *deeper learning*, that is, to seek out underlying often structural reasons as to why the African country in question had never managed its state–society relations well, why the war had occurred and why many of these problems were still in existence despite the huge outside efforts to re-construct the country. Both of these outcomes are encouraging in that many students are able to overcome their ‘existential crises’ or at least the difficulties of fieldwork and fuse evidence and theory into a greater understanding of the African environment.

However, the fact that a minority could not successfully complete one or other of the two fundamentals is not insignificant and should lead us to be cautious about exaggerating the impact of the ASV. It is entirely possible that the ASV is a highly profitable experience for a majority of students but is too difficult or too onerous an undertaking for a significant minority. It has been visible that many students are, quite reasonably, practising difficult skills of interviewing and evidence collection for the first time, but equally that they may be learning or re-learning the underpinning theories on the ground. It must be concluded, though, that with prior attendance on African politics modules and available preparatory seminars and lectures on the country in question and techniques of interviewing, there is a good chance that the students can hit the ground running and be able to extract the maximum from the whole period of their visit.

Conclusion

The article has tried to show, in a variety of ways, who the main stakeholders are in the ASV learning process and what they consider to be a learning experience. The stakeholders are thus the students and the organisers in a constant, very immediate and quite prolonged self-reflective interaction, which encompasses both practicalities and concepts in the study of politics. The learning experience then includes most of what happens on the ground from the mundane to the extraordinary. As such, the original contribution of this article has been to show how the ASV relates to the experiential learning literature and its benefits for students. The significance of this contribution is its identification of a set of practices from an experiential learning perspective that can be used

for teaching Africa within international studies through study visits at a time when such activities are becoming increasingly popular. In all, we believe that the ASV is a difficult but valuable learning experience – for students and us. Finally, if at any time this has been presented as easy, it should not be read as such: it is indeed like riding a whirlwind at times and it involved much trial, error and angst – for students and us – before we came to these conclusions.

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Note

1. There are of course many references that could be inserted for these four topics, for example, Chabal P and Daloz J-P (2009) *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. Oxford: James Currey; Ellis S and ter Haar G (2004) *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*. London: Hurst; Schatzberg M (2001) *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Harris D (2013) *Sierra Leone: A Political History*. London: Hurst; Paris R (2010) Saving liberal peace- building. *Review of International Studies* 36(2): 337–365; Bayart (2000).

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