

## Are Today's Students Different?

One Professor's 'Report from the Field'

By Penny Gill

Truly, mine is a global classroom, and we are becoming a global college. Of our 2,100 students, 22 percent are ALANA students, and the 16 percent who are international students come from seventy countries; our domestic students come from forty-eight states.

The students bring such a complex world with them into the classroom that it can nearly serve as a laboratory in which to figure out how that world "works." In my introductory comparative politics class, twelve of the twenty-five had grown up outside the United States—in Kenya, Bhutan, Bulgaria, Pakistan, Ghana, Costa Rica, India, Latvia, and Saudi Arabia. Several of the American students had lived and studied in France and Germany, and more would leave in six months for their junior year abroad.

The purpose of the course is to investigate the twin processes of democratization and development, and try to understand how they affect each other, and how each is affected by the multiple dimensions of globalization. Class became a forum where these central political questions could be discussed, sometimes with a good deal of passion. Any time anyone would argue that democracy would eventually solve all kinds of problems, for example, the Saudi student would remind us that democratic elections can be extremely destabilizing under certain circumstances. Then everyone would have to engage at a much deeper level, to articulate the conditions under which democratic elections could help resolve conflicts and not exacerbate them.

In my advanced seminar on the European Union, only two of the twenty students were without a substantial experience abroad. Five students from Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland made our discussions of the expansion of the EU into central Europe anything but remote or abstract. And the seniors fresh from their junior years [abroad] were quick to grasp what is at stake when a country adopts the euro or is subject to the European Court of Justice.

So, in many ways, these young women are quite different from those I taught thirty years ago. They assume they can and will live and work in other countries, speak another language perhaps, and certainly negotiate across ethnic, cultural, and racial "boundaries." The non-US citizens are all bilingual

or even trilingual. Most of the US and international students are multicultural as well, [with] significant experience and deep knowledge of more than one culture. They are all deeply suspicious of any claim to superiority, be it based on national identity, gender, or religious practice.

Because they live in such an expanded world, they are also well acquainted with violence, war, poverty, and other forms of social disorder and suffering. There is no easy optimism anymore, much less a romantic belief in the inevitability of progress. They are skeptical of any simple program that guarantees radical change. They know too much about systems of privilege, exploitation, and injustice. They have known violence in their families, in their schools, on their streets, and in all the media. They are not fearful, but they are alert, cautious, and sophisticated about the ways of the world.

The last essential difference shapes and animates all the others. They have grown up "inside" the Web. Here is a fascinating paradox about our experience of globalization: [the world] seems limitless in scope, diversity, and complexity [yet] that limitless diversity is also present right here on my screen, with the click of a few keys. In some profound way, space and distance have collapsed into a nearly overwhelming Now, a present "moment" of infinite possibility.

If it is true that young people experience space and time quite differently than do older generations, it may also be true that they learn differently. I notice an ease with visual information and less skill in working out complex textual arguments, for example. I wish they were more critical of what they read on Web sites, especially since authorship is so much more difficult to ascertain. For them, information is more fluid. For older readers, it comes in more discrete "chunks," and we can evaluate its source and point of view more easily.

These are significant, but I am much more impressed by the deep similarities from one generation to the next. I think even Mary Lyon, after a little acclimatization, would recognize us all as "her" students. □



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