

The Goals of Transnational Education: Reflections of a True Believer

Education Abroad Program 50th Anniversary Lecture

University of California Berkeley

Jeffrey S. Lehman

October 19, 2012

Good morning, everyone.

It is a great honor for me to be addressing you today as part of this year's celebration of the 50th anniversary of the creation of the University of California Education Abroad Program. Years such as this are of course cause for celebration – a time to reach back and appreciate the initiative of the founders as well as the achievements of a program that has expanded to a presence in 39 countries around the world. Years such as this are also natural moments for reflection – a time to think seriously about the nature of the program's benefits and costs. It is a time to ask whether the program should continue as it is today, whether it should be strengthened, or whether it should be cut back, the better to fit with today's needs and opportunities.

My title makes it clear where I stand on such a question. I am here to praise the UC EAP and its kindred programs, not to bury them. I am a true believer in the benefits of a transnational education. Indeed, I believe that such an experience is an almost-indispensible component of a proper education for life in this century.

To reach that conclusion this morning, I will be dividing my lecture into five parts: Naissance, the Evangelist's Dilemma, Utilitarian Speech, Utilitarian Action, and Confession.

A. Naissance

Let me begin by talking about naissance, the birth of my profound belief in the value of transnational education.

I want to begin here because you should not think that I have arrived at my beliefs from behind a veil of ignorance, entirely untainted by personal history or circumstance. Far from it. After hearing this background you will have to decide whether my commitments are purely the product of sentiment or idiosyncrasy rather than the fruits of rigorous analysis. I hope you do not draw that judgment, but it is ultimately for you to judge.

My beliefs about education abroad flow directly from my participation in the Sweet Briar College Junior Year in France program, during the academic year 1975-1976. That particular Junior Year in France program was started in 1923 by the University of Delaware, and it has been administered by Sweet Briar College since 1948. It is the oldest such program in America.

My year began with a break from the Sweet Briar tradition, and there was deep concern about whether that break would damage the program. Before 1975, SBCJYF students had traveled from the U.S. to France by luxury liner – most recently the QEII – and had used the journey to give the students a gentle transition. Our cohort, in contrast, sped over the ocean on an Air France jet. I think the anxiety was unwarranted; we seemed to manage the transition just fine.

Our cohort included about 75 young women and 25 young men from universities across America. Only a few of us were pursuing degrees at Sweet Briar itself. We were actually quite a diverse bunch.

Our education began with a five-week orientation in the city of Tours.

During that orientation period, I and four other students were assigned to live in the Tours home of a woman whose motivation for hosting us was entirely financial. Her house was filled with signs reminding us that we were absolutely prohibited from using her electricity; our electronic devices were required to run on batteries. At dinnertime, she served us

horse meat and blood sausage. And those foods were barely warmed, because she did not want to waste money on oven gas.

Luckily, the horrors of evenings at home were more than offset by the pleasures of our daytime courses, nicely designed to prepare us for the life we would experience in Paris. We were required to spend many hours each day in a language laboratory, working on our French grammar and diction. I vividly recall sitting there, under clumsy headphones, speaking into clumsy microphones in response to audio taped phrases. Every so often, a live voice would suddenly appear in my headset – the voice of our instructor Joelle Blot, offering me clear, firm, but gentle corrections to my pronunciation.

After five weeks, we moved on to Paris, where my housing situation improved dramatically. I was assigned to live with a wonderful three-generation family, les Abudarham, on the northern side of the city. The grandmother was an unreconstructed royalist; the daughter and the grandson were proud Gaullists; the daughter's husband was a full-throated communist. I quickly learned that politics was important, and the royalist grandmother and her communist son-in-law did not speak with one another directly. Instead, at dinner every night they took orderly turns speaking, each one explaining to me just how horrible the other one was.

After dinner all of us – the communist, the royalist, the Gaullists, and me (the American “Zheef”) – moved together to the living room to watch a television game show called “Les Chiffres et les Lettres.” Those family evenings around the television were both enjoyable and educational. They did almost as much for my French accent as Joelle Blot had done in Tours.

Initially I was supposed to be taking courses in the French universities. After the insurrections of 1968, the Sorbonne and other public universities had been reorganized into large institutions poetically named the University of Paris 1, Paris 2, Paris 3, etc. Most of my classmates were signed up for courses in the beautiful medieval buildings of Paris 4, the original Sorbonne. I, however, was a math major, so my classes in Paris 7 were consigned to the architectural monstrosity called Jussieu.

The classes themselves were pretty good, and my French classmates were surprisingly open to me, but sadly they were to last only a few months. That winter saw a mild echo of the student uprisings of 1968. A new set of legal reforms caused the students to go on strike, demanding higher wages from the government for their hard work as students, and so the universities shut down. Sweet Briar College quickly sprang into action and put together some outstanding special classes for us, including an art history class taught within the incomparable museums of Paris.

For the rest of the year I no longer had French classmates. Yet still had French teachers and I was still living with a French family. And those two features were enough to ensure that my year in France would completely change my outlook on the world.

I had entered that year endowed with the kind of worldview one might have expected from an American of my generation. I understood myself to have been supremely blessed to have grown up in the land of the free, in the nation that had liberated France from the Nazis, in the country that had put a man on the moon, in the great melting pot where the best of human civilization had been blended to establish a new and entirely superior way of life. Because I had been properly raised, I knew that I should demonstrate modesty and humility in my interactions with French people, all of whom I expected would feel enormous envy for me and my good fortune.

Needless to say, my year in France shattered that worldview. Living in France showed me that one could see the world very differently, and one might actually regard Americans as objects of bemused pity rather than envy.

In France I came to see that one could develop a relationship to one's five senses that was entirely different from the relationship I had grown up with. One could give a different priority to the sense of taste, to the sense of smell, to the sense of touch. Even to the sense of sight: my days in the Louvre and the Orangerie had offered me an entirely new way of thinking about light and darkness, about color and form.

Perhaps most importantly, the need to become fluent in French showed me how powerfully language can influence our perceptions of the world around us. The ever-patient Joelle Blot taught me that meaning is not conveyed only through the semantic units that linguists call morphemes. She showed me how a speaker can trigger emotions in the listener through the language's phonemes – its sounds.

Here's another example. French is a language in which adjectives usually follow nouns instead of preceding them. When I spoke French I found myself paying more attention to my choice of noun, feeling somehow that it was supposed to do more of the work of expressing my meaning.

Finally, learning French taught me how deeply one's approach to the world can be shaped through a language in which all nouns – even abstractions – are understood to be either male or female.

On this score I still remember the sense of revelation I felt when, living in Paris in the early 1990's, I saw a television advertisement for Gillette men's razor blades. In America, Gillette's slogan was and still is, "Gillette – the best a man can get." In France, the slogan was and still is "Gillette – la perfection au masculin." The joke was that "perfection" in French is female; if one wanted to use a male word for that sort of thing, one should say, "Gillette." Both slogans play on their target audience's desires to be perceived as "manly"; but the French slogan works on many more levels, exploiting the fact that, for francophones, gender is more deeply essentialized than it is for anglophones.

As important as my France education was, however, the most important element of that education came when I returned home. During my first few months back in the States, that unattractive smugness I had brought with me to France was back in full force; it was just flipped 180 degrees. With my new, French eyes, nothing in America was good enough. How could Americans call that inedible garbage "cheese" and that undrinkable sewage "coffee"? Why was America so addicted to gasoline? Why did Washingtonians drive cars instead of taking the metro like civilized people? Why was there no genuine ideological difference between America's two dominant political parties?

The great epiphany finally came after I had been back home for a few months. I gradually came to see that I did not have to declare one culture superior and the other inferior. I could instead try to find a way to incorporate both into my own identity, and allow them both to shape my perceptions and my emotions.

Nothing else I learned in all my years of formal education would matter so much to my adult life as that moment of intellectual rebirth. Ever since that time I have held as a core article of faith that life is more fulfilling when one experiences it from several different cultural standpoints. And in the same vein, I have believed that an enormous amount of unnecessary conflict and destruction in the world derives from monocultural ignorance. We misinterpret others' motives because we mistakenly assume their speech and actions are grounded in the same set of normative expectations as our own.

I truly believe that transnational education can both improve the lives of the students who experience it and also increase cooperation and reduce conflict across cultural lines.

B. The Evangelist's Dilemma: Preaching to the Unconverted

This brings me directly to the evangelist's dilemma. Like any evangelist, I believe that I have been granted a certain insight into the world. And I believe that others would be better off, if only they could have that same insight.

I am reinforced in my evangelical convictions by my interactions with others who have undergone the same conversion. I meet another graduate of the Sweet Briar College Junior Year in France graduate and we form near-instant bonds of understanding. We nod knowingly; we share a certain sadness for those who have not experienced what we have.

So here is the dilemma I confront as an evangelist for transnational education. If people ordinarily come to hold this true belief only after they have gone through a long process of conversion, how can I persuade them to enter into that process? Like most evangelists, I find myself employing a combination of three techniques: preaching, coercion, and utilitarian argument.

Preaching is something that authority figures do. They say things that they believe. They say them in different ways. Sometimes they say them with eloquence. Sometimes they say them with humor. Sometimes they say them with deep passion. They play with a range of voices. They use attractive cadences and seductive turns of phrase. And they repeat their message over and over again. Sometimes they have an impact.

To be sure, preachers have ethical responsibilities. Their motives need to be as altruistic as possible, and their techniques must not include misstatement. But with these caveats, I am happy to preach the value of transnational education and I am happy when others do the same.

Coercion is a bit trickier. If I believe transnational education is deeply valuable, should I require all students at my university to study abroad? That requires a careful assessment of opportunity costs – the other educational opportunities a student must forgo in order to have this experience. In the end, I think it is good for universities to include such a requirement and then to make the changes that must be made to minimize opportunity costs for students. But I recognize that others might reasonably disagree with me on this point.

However one might feel about preaching and coercion, however, the third form of persuasion – utilitarian argument – is always welcomed within academic culture. If we want to evangelize for transnational education, I believe this is the form of persuasion that will have the greatest long-term impact.

This approach requires us to speak to our audience in a consequentialist mode. We must present claims about how certain courses of action are more likely to bring about certain desirable end results than other courses of action. And we must think beyond the individual; we must consider the consequences for society as a whole.

C. Utilitarian Speech: An Intellectual "Skill Set" for the 21st Century

In the present context, I believe that it is useful to focus on a particular kind of “consequence” – the preparation of students for lives after college. With that in mind, I will now put forward for your consideration

a list of qualities that students should have by the time they finish college. The goal here is to specify qualities that will leave the students better off as individuals and will also leave our world better off in the aggregate.

I do not expect you to accept my list in its entirety. But I hope it will provoke you to think about the elements that you would prefer to see included in some alternative list.

Before I set forth my list, however, I would like to put a key premise on the table for you to consider. I submit that life in the twenty-first century is noticeably different from what it was in the twentieth century. It is noticeably different technologically. It is noticeably different geopolitically. It is noticeably different socially.

I submit further that one of the most important responsibilities of leaders – political leaders and educational leaders – and one of the most important responsibilities of professors is to acknowledge that these differences exist. There is a natural human impulse to refuse to acknowledge change. That is an especially natural impulse for people who have been successful and comfortable and happy in their lives. If the external world is constant, then whatever made us successful and comfortable and happy is likely to keep on working. If, however, the external world has changed, then we will be forced to do the hard work of analyzing whether our strategies must evolve in adaptation to those changes.

If the world has changed in material ways, then all of us who are teachers have a duty to ask whether those changes should influence our understanding of what it means to be well educated.

Permit me now to highlight three changes in the structure of the world that I believe are so important we should be asking ourselves afresh, “What are the ends of higher education?”

The World Trade Organization. Autarky is over. Ricardo has won. The nations of the world have agreed to a baseline understanding that they will favor the welfare of consumers over the welfare of producers. Any country that wants to make it harder for sellers to reach that coun-

try's buyers must present a justification. And only certain styles of justification will be entertained.

Communications technology. The global telecommunications network and the internet have dramatically reduced the costs – in time and money – of distributing information and of acquiring information.

Energy scarcity and climate change. Global living standards are rising at an unprecedented rate, the dangers of climate change are generally accepted, and total energy from fossil fuel production is expected to peak before 2030.

The convergence of these three factors means that the next generation will be facing unprecedented challenges, unprecedented opportunities, and an environment that is changing at an unprecedented pace.

To excel in this environment, I would submit that college graduates must have nine essential qualities. The first six qualities are not new; they have been valuable across cultures for centuries. I will therefore want to lay special stress on the final three qualities, whose significance has grown before our eyes.

The first three qualities together define a particular attitude towards the world outside one's own mind and body, and especially a particular attitude towards other people.

The first attitudinal quality is Curiosity. Curiosity entails an abiding interest in experiences and thoughts that are unfamiliar and novel. Moreover, genuine curiosity implies a particular attitude towards those experiences and thoughts: an openness to the possibility that they contain elements of value. A curious person assumes his or her own fallibility and seeks out ways to extend and to modify his or her beliefs about the world.

The second attitudinal quality is Empathy. Empathy entails a capacity to engage other viewpoints with imagination. Indeed, it entails an imagination so broad that it enables one to feel what others feel, and to understand who they are and how they think.

The third attitudinal quality is Skepticism. Skepticism provides a kind of attitudinal balance against curiosity and empathy. It means that,

even as one is coming to understand what someone else believes and why they believe it, one is not simply accepting that belief as necessarily true. One does not simply accept it, even if the speaker is a person whom one respects as wise and authoritative, such as a parent or a teacher.

The next three qualities define a particular way of analyzing ideas and information.

The first analytical quality is Logic. Logical thinking is remarkably difficult. Fallacies frequently confuse our efforts to engage in simple deductive reasoning. And in real life we do much more than simple deductive reasoning. We must constantly make judgments under conditions of uncertainty, and under those conditions we are prone to a broad array of heuristic biases that are not fully rational. Logic entails both an awareness of our own limitations and a commitment to overcome them as best we can.

The second analytical quality is Patience. When we grapple with difficult problems we often encounter an argument and an opposing counterargument. These situations create a kind of dissonance that is uncomfortable, and so we are tempted to rush to judgment – to choose one side or the other. Patience entails what Keats called “negative capability,” a willingness to hold the opposing ideas in one’s mind at the same time, without rushing to say that one is right and the other wrong.

The third analytical quality is Creativity. Creativity is enormously difficult. To create a truly original idea – a new way of thinking about ideas and information – requires genuine courage. Our emotions tell us that we are safer if we follow a precedent, if we repeat what someone else has said, if we apply an existing tool to our situation. To offer up something new, something fresh, is to risk embarrassment – even humiliation. It requires us to accept the risk that what we suggest might be proven incorrect – even silly. But that courage is an essential element of human progress.

As I indicated a moment ago, these six attitudinal and analytical qualities are not novel. They have been important elements of success since

time immemorial, and I do not believe they are necessarily more important today than they have been in the past.

The final three qualities that I am about to describe are less about attitude and analytic style, and more about knowledge or expertise. They are not entirely novel, either. I do believe, however, that these domains of expertise have taken on a much greater significance today than they held even fifty years ago.

The first domain of expertise is Scientific Literacy. Since the enlightenment, the universal language of mathematics, together with the evolving conceptual apparatus of the physical and life sciences, has proven more and more important to more and more dimensions of our life. In the twenty-first century as never before, those who can deploy that language and that apparatus will be the ones who shape the way we live.

The second domain of expertise is Effectiveness Across Cultural Boundaries. In the twenty-first century, fewer and fewer people will live in isolation from the world. Communications media and cheap transportation mean that all of us will interact more and more with people raised in circumstances different from ours. More and more, we will find ourselves working as members of multinational teams. One cannot underestimate the value in such situations of people who know how people from different cultures are similar and how they are different, people who can both appreciate contributions from a wide range of perspectives and also resolve possible misunderstandings that can easily occur in such situations.

The third domain of expertise, somewhat related to the second, is Multilingualism. As I suggested earlier, different languages shape the way we perceive and think about the world. By learning more than one language, I believe we vastly expand our capacity for empathy, for creative thinking, and for effectiveness across cultural boundaries. This quality has become vastly more important in recent years, as English has emerged as the modern lingua franca. What that means is that, in all parts of the world that speak something other than English as a first language, educated people are now bilingual. If English speakers do not

also become bilingual, they will be significantly behind along this vital intellectual dimension.

D. Utilitarian Action: Allowing Ends to Dictate Means

Those, I believe, are the proper ends of elite twenty-first century higher education – to cultivate these nine essential qualities – three attitudinal qualities, three analytical qualities, and three domains of expertise – in our students.

This summer, I began my work as the inaugural vice chancellor of NYU Shanghai. NYU Shanghai is the first comprehensive research university to be founded in modern China by an American university. It is both the newest university in China and also the newest portal within NYU's global network of campuses. It will offer its students a liberal education in the arts and sciences, even as they pursue a wide variety of majors.

The ends of twenty-first century higher education that I described earlier are framing many of the decisions we are making as we design the educational program at NYU Shanghai.

I want to focus especially on five of those qualities – curiosity, empathy, patience, effectiveness across cultural boundaries, and multilingualism. I want to focus on how certain structural features of NYU Shanghai might be especially well suited to developing those qualities in our students. And I want to talk about how, even in universities that lack the structural features of NYU Shanghai, a well-conceived education abroad program might help move students down that same path.

The most important structural features of NYU Shanghai are two. First, all students will spend their years in Shanghai moving imaginatively around the world, as they study in an intensely multilingual, multinational environment. And second, all students will spend significant parts of their undergraduate educations moving physically around the world, away from Shanghai to other parts of NYU's global network of campuses.

On our Shanghai campus, our student body will be thoroughly international. Half will come from mainland China, and half will come from

the rest of the world. We will structure each student's life so that he is spending as much time as possible interacting with people different from him- or herself, the better to promote empathy, patience, and all the rest. This situation will bring extra stresses to the student's lives, to be sure, but we will do all we can to manage those stresses and to transform them into learning opportunities. In addition, we are designing our curriculum to reinforce this kind of skill development. All students will have to become proficient in both English and Chinese. All students will have to take a two-course sequence that I will teach called Global Perspectives on Society, a course that will require them to engage different, culturally inflected approaches to fundamental questions about everything from filial piety to environmental responsibility. All students will have to take a two-course sequence called Global Perspectives on Culture, a course that will require them to engage different, culturally inflected forms of literature, art, and digital expression.

Moreover, every student will be required to move beyond the Shanghai campus. Every student will have to spend at least one semester, preferably two semesters, and as many as three semesters on one or more of NYU's comprehensive campuses in New York and Abu Dhabi, or NYU's eleven study-away sites distributed in great cities around the world.

I have to confess, I am tremendously excited about this new university. It is very rare that one has the opportunity to paint a university on a fresh canvas. And it is even more rare that one has the opportunity to do so while exploiting the tremendously rich palette afforded by a university as strong as NYU.

But my primary responsibility this morning is not to talk about what might be possible for us at NYU Shanghai. Rather, it is to talk about how my beliefs about the proper ends of a twenty-first century education might inform the means that are used in a context such as that of the University of California Education Abroad Program.

And here I am going to be rather presumptuous. I am going to make recommendations to you without giving any thought to cost. One might very well respond to every one of these recommendations by saying that

it would be too expensive to implement. It might cost too much money, or it might cost students the opportunity to do other things during their college years that would be of great value.

As I said, those are perfectly plausible initial responses. I believe, however, that if someone is determined to implement my recommendations, he or she will be able to find creative ways to reduce the associated costs to entirely tolerable levels.

I want to make the strong claim that a semester spent in a well-designed education abroad program can do far more to help students develop curiosity, empathy, patience, effectiveness across cultural boundaries, and multilingualism than any alternative use of their time. And I want to make the even stronger claim that these goals are so important that they should trump all other academic goals that might be shaping their undergraduate years.

So what do I mean by “a well-designed education abroad program”? A summer tour of a foreign city with a bunch of fellow UC students, riding around in a bus, listening to an English-speaking tour guide, does not count at all. A well-designed education abroad program must come as close as possible to giving a student all of the following experiences:

- Spending a full semester, but preferably a full academic year, in another country;
- Taking classes alongside local students;
- Developing proficiency in a foreign language;
- Living with a local host family.

I recognize that each of these targets add stress and strain to a student’s educational experience. But I believe that this stress and strain has an enormous potential payoff, and that students will reap the benefits of their investment throughout the balance of their lives.

Let me put it somewhat differently. We all know that Berkeley is a wonderfully diverse, multinational campus. But for an American student, studying here on this campus is simply not the same as studying

abroad. It is far too easy to glide through four years here in a largely mono-cultural bubble.

In the best of all possible worlds, the UC system would require all students who hold U.S. passports to participate in a well-designed education abroad program. In a second-best world, the UC system would strongly encourage such students to do so. In a third-best world, the UC system would at least eliminate the structural obstacles – such as excessive major requirements – that make it hard for students who want to follow this path to be able to do so on their own.

E. Confession

My talk this morning has been characterized by some faintly religious undertones, so I think that I should conclude with a few words of confession.

When I tell people that I am now living in China, one reaction that I sometimes receive from people who are very sophisticated goes something like this:

“Oh, Jeff, that’s wonderful! While you are there you are of course mastering Chinese! And that will give you the opportunity to opportunity to test out, first-hand, one of the most interesting questions raised by Richard Nisbett’s book, *The Geography of Thought* – the extent to which cognitive structures established under one linguistic and cultural frame shift when a person truly masters a second linguistic and cultural frame.”

Now for those of you who have not yet read *The Geography of Thought*, I heartily recommend that you do. Nisbett summarizes an interesting experimental psychology literature showing how, even though people are all born with essentially the same wiring, the experience of being raised in different cultures and different languages leads people to develop different perceptual and cognitive frames. People from east and west find different features of their environment to be salient. They follow different patterns when they “chunk” their observations into categories for purposes of analysis. Etcetera, etcetera.

Nisbett’s research makes us wonder how durable these cultural categories are. If we grow up in one cultural and linguistic swimming pool

and then are dunked in a second linguistic and cultural bath at age 18, what happens to our cognitive wiring? Does our original cognitive framework evolve into a blended cognitive framework? Do we develop a second, alternative cognitive framework that we employ in some situations, while switching back to our original cognitive framework in other situations? And what if we receive this second linguistic and cognitive bath when we are in our fifties instead of when we are teenagers? Have our brains lost the plasticity to adapt?

So here is my confession. Although I have spent the past four years living in China, and I might have been a perfect guinea pig for this research, I have not yet learned Chinese. Working in an environment where others are genuinely bilingual, and where my administrative responsibilities have felt all-consuming, I have not been able to invest the time that is required to learn Chinese.

I hope that in the years ahead I will be able to set that time aside. For one thing, I really would like to test out this question presented by Nisbett's work. From personal experience I know that our brains are reasonably plastic when we are teenagers. At least during that golden window of time, we can add to our cognitive framework, developing the ability to draw our world from more than a one-point perspective. I hope that this golden window never closes, but it is a question well worth exploring.

But the second reason is more personal. These days I find myself living with a kind of existential fear. I worry that, at any moment, I might bump into Joelle Blot again. My fear is that she would immediately march me into a language lab and test me on my Chinese phonetics. And to this day, the last thing I would want to do is disappoint her.

I thank the UC EAP for inviting me to speak, and I thank all of you for giving me your precious time this morning.