

JEN BARTON, JESSICA MCCRUM,
VANESSA CONDEMI
AND THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The emphasis in this book is on explaining the value of experiential and place-based learning, and the teacher's role in facilitating a study tour. Here, as in most educational "best practice" books, the students themselves are pushed to the margins. To the extent that they do appear, it is as subjects, the recipients of the sort of strategies outlined in Chapter Three. Discussion most often focuses on taking them out of their comfort zones, making them see links between visits and the subject's theme, and so on. What all of this forgets is that without the students' contributions, a study tour wouldn't work.

At a very basic level, this means having students who do the reading to prepare for visits, who are on time every morning, and who listen to instructions when the group is navigating its way around the New York subway: A study tour involving sixty students requires them to be diligent, reliable, and willing and able to abide by the rules. Of course, those are qualities that any teacher in any classroom asks of students. The difference is that in the experiential learning situation, the students don't feel as though they are merely following orders. As John Dewey explained a century ago, traditional, classroom teaching, where the teacher teaches and the students listen and take notes, requires "docility, receptivity and obedience."¹ Dewey advocated a more interactive process, where teachers and students work together to make meaning of visits. Education scholars now call this "collaborative learning," and as Johnson, Johnson and Smith have pointed out, this collaboration involves the students cooperating with one-another as well as with their teachers.²

¹ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1963. First published in 1938.), 18.

² David Johnson, Roger Johnson, and Karl Smith, *Active Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom* (Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company, 1998), 9:4. See also, Anthony and Jan Herrington, *Authentic Learning Environments in Higher Education* (Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing, 2006), 6.

The three students whose essays follow, were all team players. They all helped make the group function cohesively, and ultimately made the study tour work. Jen Barton, a cross-institutional student from the University of Western Australia who knew none of the Melbourne students, faced the sternest test, but she fitted in seamlessly, and a year later she accompanied a Melbourne University student to Washington where they both took up internships. Vanessa Condemini was one of those people who could step up in an emergency. The day we took the ferry to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, Vanessa and three other girls got separated from the main group on the subway. They took a cab, thinking it would be easy to meet up with the group at South Ferry, but found themselves deposited at the Staten Island Ferry terminal instead. The other girls were ready to give up, but Vanessa piloted them to the Statue of Liberty Ferry and they caught up with us soon after. My initial impression of Jessica McCrum was that she was quiet and studious, which was true, but she was also willing to assist when required, asking questions and thanking speakers at the end of meetings. Her biggest contribution, however, was that she uncomplainingly roomed with a girl, who, by the last leg of our trip, had become unpopular to the extent that we had requests *not* to be roomed with her. It seems like a small thing, but without these sacrifices a study tour can easily fall apart.

Each of these three girls had strong academic records prior to the study tour. According to studies undertaken in the United States, although most students benefit from experiential learning, strong students benefit more.³ It must be said that measuring benefits is an art, not a science, because as well as grades, there are hard-to-quantify things to take into account. These include the effect on the student's confidence, ambition, and ultimately, whether they have success in their chosen field. Jen (study tour class of 2002) took up an internship a year later with one of our partner organizations, a Washington non-profit named One Economy. From there, she joined a law firm in her native Perth, and I didn't hear from her for some years, until she asked for a reference to do graduate work at Cambridge University. Jen was always destined for success, but clearly the study tour gave her a push along. Vanessa and Jessica (study tour class of 2011) are still too young to have entered the workforce, but the study tour has already been a positive influence, with Vanessa going back to the America on exchange at the University of North Carolina, and Jessica gaining entry into Melbourne University's prestigious law program, after

³ Alan Smith and Gregory Sobel, *Place and Community-Based Education in Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 77.

which she plans to give legal representation to unions, something she links to her visit to the AFL-CIO in Washington.

FROM UWA TO CAMBRIDGE

JEN BARTON

I remember being sprawled out on the Oak Lawn at UWA on a sunny spring day when a friend suggested going to America on a course run by a visiting lecturer from Melbourne. It was just a few weeks after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, and smoke was still rising from the World Trade Centre. While it was a tragic time, I knew that a study trip at this pivotal moment would offer a remarkable opportunity to learn more about the US.

The trip was all that I hoped it would be and more. I returned with a much greater appreciation of American history, America's place in the world, its internal politics – and the importance of the American Dream. Yet the ability of the course to open doors and offer life-changing experiences became apparent a few months later when I received a letter inviting me to apply for an award at UWA. The Patrick O'Brien Political Science Graduate Internship Award offered a great opportunity to further my political knowledge, but I needed to come up with a good application and an organization that would accept me. A friend from the course recommended that I get in touch with Glenn to see if Alec Ross, whom we met in Washington D.C., would let me come to One Economy, a small not-for-profit organization that aimed to provide low income people with greater access to the Internet.

Alec and his wife were two of many inspiring individuals we encountered on the trip. They had met at a disadvantaged school in Baltimore when they were both part of the Teach for America program. Felicity still taught in Baltimore while Alec had helped found One Economy and kindly agreed to let me do a four week internship at a small organization that was committed to “helping bridge the digital divide.” One year after the trip, I was back in the US, staying at GWU and taking the short walk past the White House to be an intern at One Economy.

It was fascinating to see how a small not-for-profit group operated, and from that brief experience with One Economy, I'm not surprised that it is now a large international organization or that Alec has been profiled in the *New York Times* as a senior adviser on digital diplomacy to Secretary

Clinton. Aside from the weekday work at One Economy, my time in D.C. allowed me to interview a range of lobbyists for my dissertation (including a lobbyist from the NRA and the press secretary for Common Cause), attend a baseball game in Baltimore, study in the Library of Congress, visit Jefferson's home in Monticello and look at monuments on the Mall. For a *West Wing* tragic, the experience could only be described as incredible, and for a politics honors student, it was invaluable in shaping my dissertation on interest group politics in America.

A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

JESSICA MCCRUM

I initially chose to take Searching for the American Dream because I have always been fascinated by America and the enduring idea that Americans are connected by a central philosophy revolving around the concept of working hard to get ahead. The lead up to the trip was quite exciting, as we were regularly sent emails from Glenn detailing the wide variety of organizations and places we would be visiting and the significance of each. This helped to set the scene for our visit and the idea of what the American dream was.

The sense of history that is prevalent in Boston made it the ideal city to visit first. I particularly enjoyed the JFK museum as it offered unique insight into one of the most powerful and dynamic American families. Like many others I have always had a strong interest in the lives of the Kennedys, especially given the turbulent historical context of John and Bobby's leadership. I later chose to write my final essay on Bobby Kennedy having been inspired by the extraordinary impact he had when he ran for the presidential nominee position for the Democrats, especially through his attempts to promote equality and reconciliation, all of which are still burning issues in America today. Another highlight of Boston was the opportunity to work in a food bank. It exposed me to the extremely difficult lives that many Americans lead but also illustrated the sense of community participation and volunteerism prevalent in America.

A significant part of the trip that I greatly enjoyed was the focus on community action and protection, which is often achieved in America by the unions. The importance of unions was initially demonstrated in New York through our study of the terrible fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, which dramatically exemplified the exploitation of workers. It was also wonderful to gain an insight into the work being done by volunteers at The Point in the Bronx, where disadvantaged youths are provided with opportunities to become more self-sufficient so that they can overcome the barriers they face. Our visit to the AFL-CIO union was one of the best parts of the trip. It offered a different perspective to the American Dream, one in which a community of people rather than

individuals work together in order to achieve success. It was also great to finish our meeting and realize that the White House was just across the road.

The trip impressed upon me the elusive nature of the American Dream, demonstrating why for many it is a dream rather than a reality. But it is the motivational aspect of the dream, and the idea of improving one's life, that inspires Americans, which facilitates success. Additionally, while the dream is often centered upon individual success, through our visits I witnessed a strong element of collective action in America, which contributes to establishing the success of many. Overall it was an amazing experience that enabled me to gain an insight into the impact the American Dream has had on people and groups, and continues to have today.

WE DID IT AS A GROUP

VANESSA CONDEMI

The three-week study intensive trip ‘Searching for the American Dream’ changed my life in ways I was not even remotely prepared for. As a recently decided History major I had left it a bit late applying to the subject, so it was with equal amounts of excitement and nervousness that I accepted my position on the tour. I was extremely curious about American History in particular, and coupled with an intense desire to visit all of the cities that were mentioned, the study trip was the perfect opportunity to gain a deeper knowledge in my field of interest.

Our first meeting as a group completely removed all remaining feelings of anxiety, Glenn and his wife Cassie were everything you could possibly ask for in group leaders, they were approachable and knowledgeable, ready to answer any and all of the thousands of questions that the fifty or so of us had to throw at them. The peers in my group were all fantastic and warm people, we had the same ideals going into the trip: to make the most of our time and learn as much as we possibly could with an open and inquisitive mind. The atmosphere amongst the students was unanimously positive, everyone that was there was there to learn and experience as much of America as we could. The friendships that I made from the trip are irreplaceable.

It was an invaluable experience. The people we were able to meet, talk to and interact with is not something that would ever be able to be replicated. The trip was a whirlwind and extremely tiring at some points, but it was moments such as when you’re in the Peace Corps headquarters, or talking to Hilary Clinton’s Senior Advisor on Innovation that reinvigorate you. The people we met and the places we visited were ones that I admittedly wouldn’t have gone, or wouldn’t have been able to, had I just visited the United States as a tourist. However, those exact places were the most beneficial and provided the most depth to our trip; such as attending a Gospel church in Brooklyn and ‘The Point’ Community Development Center in the Bronx. These visits provided us with an intimate knowledge of the realities, struggles and hopes of Americans while they battled to achieve their dreams. Throughout the trip we learnt

about how the American Dream can be just as much of a group effort as an individual one, and upon reflection this was certainly true for our study tour group.

The study trip changed so many things for me personally. It added a wealth of knowledge to my History major, a true appreciation for American culture and history, and further opened my mind to the opportunities that lay in front of me. I feel that it was the only way to truly appreciate American History and society as you are completely immersed, meeting so many wonderful people that my curiosity and thirst for more knowledge only grew. It was an unexpected stepping stone to more opportunities, opening doors and windows that I couldn't have anticipated. Searching for the American Dream allowed me to pursue an international exchange to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill where I studied American History for a further semester.

As a group we did not just search for the American Dream, we learnt the value of having our own dreams as well.

