

Book Review

Gap Year: How Delaying College Changes People in Ways the World Needs.

Joseph O'Shea. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 200 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1421410364. Paperback, \$29.95.

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Global citizenship is a term that commonly circulates in academic and popular discourse. Its usage often conjures images of hopeful transformation. If individuals could just imagine themselves as citizens of a larger international or even global community, the political and social ills (e.g., poverty, conflict, environmental degradation) that result from narrow national interests could be reduced, or so the logic goes. This trickle-down theory of intrapersonal growth underpins Professor Joseph O'Shea's defense of and advocacy for the expanse of extended study abroad programming in *Gap Year: How Delaying College Changes People in Ways the World Needs*.

O'Shea's lithe (183 pages with references), straight-forward account is divided into two parts. The first offers a descriptive summary of stories participants in O'Shea's qualitative study relayed to him about their gap year experiences. In the second part of the book, O'Shea situates these stories within educational, psychological, and philosophical theories of education to build an integrated theoretical and empirical framework that explains the impact of gap year experiences for participants. He then utilizes this framework to make suggestions to gap year program planners regarding the design of gap year programs. I proceed by following the same format as O'Shea, commenting first on the design and findings of his empirical study and then moving to his theoretical analysis.

How do gap years pedagogically help people to learn and how do gap years help people become full members of civil society?

Prior to devoting five chapters to the reportage of gap year experiences in which O'Shea lets participants speak with minimal authorial mediation, he provides a brief introduction to his study and states plainly the problem that he hopes to address with his research: (a) Little has been done to examine the effects of the rising popularity of gap year programming in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and elsewhere; and (b) there is debate and mounting critique about the benefits of participation in such programs. In other words, "Although gap years have gained in popularity, their efficacy is unclear" (p. 7). Two primary and interrelated research questions frame O'Shea's study: How do gap years pedagogically help people to learn and how do gap years help people become full members of civil society?

O'Shea asserts that knowing what happens both during and after gap years will help educators better design gap year programming. Doing so, in turn, will help to address "the challenges of our time" through cultivating "smart, critical, and innovative thinkers...who use their talents to help others" (p. 1). In short, the gap year serves as an education intervention that can "contribute to growth in how young adults make meaning of themselves, their relationships, and the world" (p. 2).

Gap years are traditionally undertaken by volunteers from developed countries between high school/secondary school and matriculation to college or university. Participants live for nine to twelve months in a developing country (in urban or rural locales) and volunteer with a non-governmental organization (NGO), typically in either the education or public health sectors. The 400 participants in O'Shea's study took part in a gap year through Project Trust, a prominent UK-based international gap year provider. O'Shea collected data from three different sources: (a) Participant observations and interviews with approximately 180 students before and after their gap year experiences; (b) in-depth one to three hour interviews with 31 students who had completed their gap years and were currently in college; and (c) 400 gap year students' end-of-year reports. Their placements represented a broad spectrum ranging from a remote village in Guyana to downtown Buenos Aires, Argentina.

O'Shea identifies *change* as the overarching theme that characterizes both participants' rationale(s) for taking a gap year as well as their experiences during their gap year. In his empirical chapters entitled "Changes in Themselves," "Changes in Relationships," "Changes in Civic and Religious Perspectives," and "Changes in Ways of Thinking and Future Plans," participants report "wanting to experience poverty rather than watching it on TV" (p. 17) and through this experience "question [their] beliefs--why we are the way we are; why we do the things we do" (p. 81). Some report feeling changed "because I lived as a local. I saw the world from a villager's perspective" (p. 37). Others express skepticism about the authenticity of "seeing as a local," stating, "You try to be like common people here, but it's not the same if you have a return ticket; you can press the escape button and rewind" (p. 110).

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O'Shea particularly highlights students who had negative, or alternately, very influential experiences over the year. Doing so allows him to draw conclusions from the margins that call into question or alternately support his general findings (discussed in detail below). His follow-up interviews with participants once they have returned home

are particularly demonstrative of the lasting intellectual and emotional dissonance many volunteers felt as a result of their gap year. As one participant recalled, “Last week, I was at my college’s 500 year anniversary and I was wearing coat tails and spent 90 pounds on dinner and I thought, what the [expletive] am I doing. That could have paid wages for Consuelos for a year” (p. 110).

In the second part of his account, O’Shea brings together delimited theories of student development, transformational learning, civic education, and cosmopolitanism. O’Shea argues that independent of one another, these theories are unable to account for the ways in which particular shifts in participants’ viewpoints come about or how these shifts can be facilitated in educational settings. However, O’Shea considers these theories collectively and utilizes them to build an integrated framework he terms “civic meaning making” that explains participants’ experiences in gap year programming. We might think of civic meaning making as a two-step process that makes clear the ways in which gap year participants interpret their subjective realities (e.g., of themselves, others, and the world around them) but also how their interpretive frameworks can be changed through participation in gap year programming.

O’Shea finds empirically and theoretically that gap years foster civic meaning making as well as changes in civic meaning making along cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal axes. Cognitively, volunteers demonstrate increased capacities in understanding a wide range of issues (e.g., international relations, development aid, structural inequality) as well as an increased ability to critically interpret these issues; intrapersonally, volunteers came to understand themselves independent of the perspectives of others; and interpersonally, volunteers expressed a greater capacity to develop relationships with people different than themselves (i.e., from a range of national and socioeconomic backgrounds).

While O’Shea’s study is focused on gap years as non-academic, experiential programming, administrators and educators in both K-12 and higher education might draw upon O’Shea’s findings and civic meaning making framework to design assessment models for their own programs (e.g., study abroad, service-learning). The categories O’Shea utilizes to detail changes in participants’ behaviors, values, and attitudes (e.g., changes in tolerance and understanding, changes in self-understanding) readily lend themselves to program facilitators as categories of reference to provide on-course and summative assessment to program participants.

O’Shea has provided an innovative model of integrated empirical and theoretical research that is useful for both academics and practitioners (a rare feat). His study also helps to explain, through rich and descriptive accounts of participants’ gap year experiences, how gap year programming works to change participants’ thinking in ways that resonate long after they return home. The question that remains unanswered lies in the very premise

of O’Shea’s account. How do changes in the thinking of gap year participants who hail from developed countries (and whose liberal arts education, O’Shea contends, is not able to sufficiently expand students’ worldview) subsequently change the problems of the world?

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O’Shea concedes that possibilities for future research include understanding the impact of gap year programming on the communities in which gap year participants volunteer. However, as it reads now, the needs of these communities *help* to give meaning to the lives of gap year participants while the “actual impact of the volunteers’ service to the gap year community may have been limited” (p. 144). O’Shea reports that “nearly a quarter of Americans now say they do not have a strong sense of what makes their lives meaningful” (p. 144). However, “Individuals with a purpose and meaning are more fulfilled and likely to support others in need” (p. 144).

We are left wondering what those needs are and how or indeed if gap year programming might be calibrated so as to address them. It may not sound as lofty to characterize gap year programming as occasioning changes that participants themselves need or that countries sending volunteers might need. However, these are in fact the conclusions that can be drawn from O’Shea’s study. What the world needs is for another study, or perhaps is another matter entirely.