

THE POWER OF STORIES

Globalization in India and the TIPS Curriculum

By Anu Taranath

The globe may seem to be getting smaller, but I remain utterly fascinated by its vastness. There are so many people in our world, and I often wonder what makes us similar or different from each other. For me, stories provide a pathway to better understand our world and ourselves. Stories connect us to one another and can help us better plot our own place in the grand and sometimes-chaotic scheme of things.

At the University of Washington in Seattle, I teach transnational and postcolonial literature, focusing on parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia. Using stories as a hook, I encourage my students to read themselves in our books, whether we are reading about Zimbabwe or Pakistan, Nigeria or Barbados. Most students enter my classes with good intentions and big hearts but little knowledge of where these countries are on a map or who the people inhabiting these lands might be. I encourage my students to open their hearts to the stories that we read and hear, and to replace the common words we automatically think of when presented with “the Global South” with more useful and honest concepts such as complexity, nuance, history, privilege, representation, voice, ethics, and agency.

“TIPS,” an acronym for Things, Ideas, People, and Self.

For the past decade, I have been leading university students to Bangalore, India, on a study abroad program focused on activism, development, and social change. I began my program as a way to understand the city of Bangalore through the lens of social justice. Bangalore, you may know, is called the “Silicon Valley of India” and since the late 1980s has transformed itself into an international hub of high-tech firms, including computer, biotechnology, and business processing and outsourcing companies.

As an Indian-American who has spent time in India visiting my extended family, I have witnessed firsthand how Bangalore has dramatically changed: greater options of consumer goods and Western products, professional opportunities in computers and information technology (IT), and skyrocketing real estate values. What I could not understand, however, was how such changes meandered and manifested their way in different people’s lives. Surely, I thought, there must be differences in how “globalization” and “development” affect different people? So I created the study abroad program in India as a way to learn alongside my students how large global shifts are affecting the lives of ordinary people. Many Indians and Indian-Americans view Bangalore’s changes as an improvement, as examples of “good progress” and “good development.” Often, though, supporters are also the ones who have gained the most in terms of opportunity, wealth, and access to consumer goods. What about other people in and around the city, such as the migrants, miscreants, and misfits who have not fit into the single story of “progress and development”? What might their stories teach us?

On our study abroad program, my students and I learn about a range of issues by working with and listening to Bangalore’s residents, activists, and teachers. We learn about a growing city and its struggles with garbage,

water, poverty, labor, and migration. We learn about gender challenges, gay rights, disability access, and identity issues that people seek to improve. We learn about how opulence coexists with poverty and how caste, class, religious, and educational differences play out in the modern, globalized Indian city. Ultimately, we learn how to listen to multiple stories as we learn about brokenness and healing, justice and action. I urge my students to consider how the economic and cultural shifts in Bangalore translate across the various communities throughout the city, not just affluent, educated, English-speaking urbanites. What about others? What stories are not seen or heard in the celebration of globalization and the scramble to purchase, wear, code, eat, or drink it?

My students and I learn about the local context in Bangalore, but we also learn about India and other regions of the Global South. The more people we meet, the better we understand how concepts such as “progress,” “globalization,” and “development” are contextual and relative. I ask my students whether there are ways to globalize and develop economically while still including all segments of society. What would that look and feel like? My study abroad program to India teaches students that when it comes to development and growth, there is no single story to tell, no composite glimpse of “success” to herald. The reality, in Bangalore as in all places around the world, is that rapid changes are great in some ways and not so great in other ways. It all depends on whose lives we are considering and how inclusive our lens might be.

Aside from visiting such places and seeing and hearing the stories of places like Bangalore, how do we encourage students and ourselves to develop a more inclusive and contextual lens? We do this by intentionally slowing down our interactions with the sights, sounds, and people around us, and by offering opportunities for meaningful reflection. We better understand stories by encouraging our students to become storytellers themselves.



My students and I have just published a book together—*TIPS to Study Abroad: Simple Letters for Complex Engagement* (Flying Chickadee, 2014). The book showcases letters that I invited my students to pen weekly while in India, letters that focused on “TIPS,” an acronym for Things, Ideas, People, and Self. The letters that my students produced were funny, insightful, poignant, and provocative. To what or to whom did students write letters? Here’s a sample:

Dear Plastic Water Bottles
Dear Sweet Autorickshaw Driver
Dear Generosity
Dear Girl I Read About in the Papers who was Bitten by a Snake and Died
Dear Contradiction
Dear Chai Breaks
Dear Myself Before I Came to India
Dear Myself After I Go Home and Dear Poop

The letters my students wrote were amazing, not only because they nicely captured the cacophony of sights, sounds, smells, and people that is India, but also because they used the assignment as a space to navigate the identity issues that traveling abroad frequently raises. Westerners often go abroad to “see something different,” but they aren’t always sure how to make sense of the differences around them. My students, like many Westerners visiting the Global South for the first time, found their previous understandings about race, sexuality, gender, poverty, privilege, and access to be inadequate and unsatisfactory. By contrast, the weekly ritual of handwriting TIPS letters provided a focused and almost-meditative space for students to reflect on what they had experienced and how they felt changed or fortified.

Even though the TIPS letter writing assignment was designed for a study abroad and international education context, it seems to me that the TIPS curriculum can be a versatile tool to help us grapple with the complexities of any location, be it near or far from home. *TIPS to Study Abroad* offers a practical curricular tool for teachers and students interested in issues of cultural difference and diversity, and contributes to the broader conversation on what social justice looks and feels like around the world.

Additionally, while the TIPS curriculum is quite simple—regular letters to Things, Ideas, People, and Self—the process actually encourages both a broadening and sharpening of our critical lens in complex ways. Whether visiting rapidly growing cities such as Bangalore, Taipei, or Nairobi, or rural and remote villages in countries such as Indonesia and Ecuador, the TIPS method reminds us to approach our environment from multiple perspectives; pay attention to the multiple stories we might have

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missed in our initial eagerness; and personalize what it is that we see, feel, and think. If we can teach our students that all regions of the world are complicated places and that worthy stories reside in every street corner, home, and heart, I think that we will have done good work. ■



Photo by Kathy Cowell.

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