

The Student Ship: A Semester at Sea Ethnography

Introduction

On the Fall 1999 Semester at Sea voyage at 12:30 in the morning, half way between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the middle of the Red Sea, a young man put an oversized life ring around his body, tied a line to it and went over the edge of the ship, the “SS Universe Explorer,” six decks above the water, intending to rappel down, touch the water, and then return to the ship. A quarter of the way down, he slipped out of the life ring and fell into the ocean.

When we first boarded, the captain had told us that the worst thing that could happen to any of us was to fall into the ocean. The ship is around 650 feet long and takes almost an hour to turn. Turning is costly too. On this evening the sea was rough, with white caps. Someone mentioned that there were dangerous sharks in the Red Sea, as well. We were far from shore, and none of the passengers really knew what other hazards there were.

A friend who was with the young man who went overboard, quickly threw a few more life rings in after him, notified the ship’s bridge which fixed a GPS reading on the location, ran downstairs a deck and threw in some more life rings. But the young man didn’t see the life rings.

The ship began to turn back to where the student went overboard, and everyone on the ship, many of whom were asleep, were called to muster, with about 80 people to a station. Role was called to find out if anybody else went overboard. No one had.

By about 1:30 am, the ship was in the vicinity of the incident, and half of the passengers were on the ship’s decks to see if they could spot him. Someone spotted the life rings, with no one in them. The staff captain was on the wing of the bridge, with a spot light, and later was reported to have said that he was worried that he would feature a shark feeding frenzy.

Someone soon spotted the young man, who was still alive, and had been swimming, without a life ring, for nearly an hour in the rough, but buoyant, saline and warm Red Sea.

A small craft was sent out to pick him up, putting the crew members at risk, due to the rough seas and bringing a small boat back to a large ship at night in stormy weather.

The young man was brought back to the ship, put in quarantine in the infirmary for his folly, and asked to leave when we arrived at Port Said in Egypt four days later. Concerned about rumors, the Executive and Academic deans were cautious about how the news of this man’s escapade would travel around the ship. Would there be copycats lionizing this risk-taking adventure?

Three weeks later, after we had visited Istanbul, Dubrovnik, and Rome and were docked in Morocco, this young man showed up again wanting to rejoin the return voyage to Florida. His mother had worked extra hours to pay the \$14,000 tuition, plus the \$2-3,000 travel costs in the ports (the trip costing perhaps \$17,000 – 19,000 total in 1999), and he very much wanted to continue. He wasn't allowed to do so due to the seriousness of his exploit, which could have cost him and others their lives.

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Semester at Sea, a university on a ship, is such a complex operation, that, like the French team of ethnographers led by Marcel Grieuil studying Dogon funerary practices in North Africa, for example, a team approach might make sense here, too, were one to try to write an ethnography of the voyage.

The University of Pittsburgh has accredited Semester at Sea academically for around the past 3 decades. Most of the senior staff members at the Semester at Sea office in Pittsburgh have been employed there a long time, – many of them occupying the same roles they did as in 1999.

Recently the University of Pittsburgh has decided not to accredit it after the summer of 2006 and the Institute for Shipboard Education (ISE) which runs Semester at Sea is presently looking for another University to sponsor them. Therefore this is the last Semester at Sea fall voyage, under academic accreditation from the University of Pittsburgh. It's also one of the largest voyages with 684 students, compared with about approximately 625 students in 1999, when I last sailed. It's a very popular voyage and university experience.

I got the opportunity to travel on board the ship this time because over the summer, someone who was planning to work in the field office, which organizes the 30 or so trips in every port, cancelled at the last minute, and I took the job, a position I had done in 1999 also. In the intervening years, I had attended graduate school at Berkeley, the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the University of Edinburgh, all in ethnography-related disciplines. This time I wanted to write about the Semester at Sea voyage.

For me, initially, it's the differences and changes that occur as one moves from place to place, which are both interesting and thought provoking. For example, coming most recently from northern California, and western Pennsylvania in the United States, the flight attendant on the airplane from Miami to The Bahamas, her Bahamian accent, her warmth and sense of assured presence, struck me afresh. In general for me, it's the breaks from kinds of social homogeneity that are interesting and potentially informative. What kind of information gets conveyed, how is this interpreted, what is represented, and what does it say both about travelers and inhabitants in these cross-cultural situations? Where might possible misinterpretations occur and about what and on what levels?

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The Bahamas (August 25, 2005)

At the Bahamas airport, two Mennonites of the Eastern Pennsylvania parish, were standing waiting for their baggage wearing their plain clothes. There was a lot of baggage on the floors around the luggage carousels. While many travelers were dressed in casual summer clothes, these two stood out quite dramatically. I went to talk with them. They were from Maryland, traveling to visit Mennonite friends who lived at a Mennonite Bible mission on St. Andrew's island, not missionizing per se, but seemingly coming for a holiday. This was their 13th visit to The Bahamas. By contrast, very few of the other travelers in the airport seemed to have any interest in religion. Quite a few people around noon were getting alcoholic drinks. Bahamians ran customs and all parts of the airport.

The Bahamas, when I landed, were warm, humid, rainy, and wind swept, with low trees, many of which were palm. As the taxi driver and I spoke during the ride in, he responded with understanding with a deep, resonant, affirmative sound. The taxi driver pointed out Fort Charlotte as we came into Nassau. He told me the Bahamas have about 300,000 people, with about 150,000 of them on Nassau. He took me to the colorful buildings at the entrance to the cruise ships' docks, in front of which a lot of mini-van taxis stood. Some men played board games outside, and talked with one another in a relaxed way.

As I moved out onto the pier where the cruise ships were docked, the huge ship the "Norwegian Dawn" was arriving. At first I didn't see the name, and got out my bagpipes to greet this huge vessel, as I thought it might be the current Semester at Sea ship the "MV Explorer," and I had often played when the Semester at Sea ship, the "SS Universe Explorer," arrived in ports in 1999. When I saw the name, I asked a man on the pier nearby where the Semester at Sea ship was docked and he replied with a smile and a slight Bahamian accent, "Oh, you mean the student ship," pointing to a nearby pier.

I hadn't heard it called the student ship before, when I sailed in 1999. Very few maritime ventures I know of offer such an extended onboard international learning opportunity, structured as an academic semester, so the name makes sense. This ship provides an opportunity for students to learn about the world, both in the classroom on the ship, as with people well as on the ground in ports. But what world and who was learning about it, and what were they learning? And what was the context? What views are they getting? And what does it mean to learn? How does information-exchange work? Yes, students onboard may or may not read trenchant anthropological critiques, for example, about significant world problems, considering questions of poverty, for example, but they do so first hand in the context of a world shaped for them by the Semester at Sea voyage and their experiences on the ground. For example, Desmond Tutu is traveling on this voyage from Brazil to South Africa, as an interport lecturer, an intellectual and a clergyman, who has played a very active role in South Africa's post-apartheid reforms. Semester at Sea participants have a chance to meet, talk with, and hear him lecture. On Semester at Sea, students may study astronomy, or read literature for course credit, as well as do Semester

at Sea organized service projects. But how are these students situated vis-à-vis questions of representation, experience, post-modernity, socio economic processes such as globalization, people in the ports, and as tourists? And was there anything unique about this voyage which might re-write and re-formulate some of the world's problems, such as war and injustice, actually shaping change, beyond that? Perhaps this will happen through what students learn and experience.

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I walked up the gang way of the ship and first met two Philipinos, and then a Romanian woman, who spoke English pretty well. Two people searched my bags. Then a man named Chris, a Philipino who had sailed with the ship on 10 month contracts for a number of years, took me up to the front desk, which was like a fairly elegant hotel lounge. The woman in the uniform behind the desk was from the Crimea in the Ukraine, and on her first voyage. She checked me in. I saw a member of the Semester at Sea staff from Pittsburgh, whom I had known earlier, walk by and soon met him briefly in the hall on the way to my room, a fairly spacious inside room.

Semester at Sea offers such a cosmopolitan experience with a cosmopolitan crew, in the comfort of a large, very modern ship, that were one to compare the cosmopolitan quality of the experience with a University in the US, one might compare it to a college at a university on the east or west coast, the United Nations, or a community college, in terms of the wide variety of ports which people visit. In terms of comfort, it's like a floating country club. In terms of international shipboard education, it may aspire academically to challenge the students in ways unique to the voyage, to be the best of international shipboard education.

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The present ship is technologically advanced, as well as fast. Students can easily connect to the Internet. I want also to see what part of the student body engages the Internet and how other students fully engage the people they meet and how. What will they learn and what role will technology play in furthering or limiting this? Will this be a very comfortable US ship, on which students spend much of their time negotiating a technologically and media-mediated way of understanding the world, or will many directly engage the countries they visit, learn and develop? Or will this be a kind of United Nations ship, as one person in the Global Studies course recently suggested, where people on the ship meet people around the world learning about and discussing world problems.

In general, I want to examine how the experience and the structure of this voyage shape certain kinds of relations and learning experiences for the students as tourists.