

## Chapter 9

# Designing Study Abroad With Empathy and Engagement: A Case Study for Project-Based Global Learning Experiences

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter describes results from a student-driven partnership between York College of Pennsylvania and governmental/non-governmental health agencies in Liberia. Presented as two parallel case studies, and narrating research processes and outcomes of the project, it argues that by combining the empathy techniques of “human-centered design” (commonly known as Design Thinking) with principles of project-based learning, this people-centered method can produce richer global experiences for students. This method can also produce qualitative data that is useful for intercultural problem-solving, and therefore can inform ongoing and productive partnerships that employ a human-centered approach to interdisciplinary collaboration.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter chronicles a student-driven partnership between York College of Pennsylvania and governmental/non-governmental health agencies in Liberia, exploring synergies discovered at the intersection of global learning, human-centered design, project-based learning, and community engagement. To illustrate these synergies, the authors chronicle two related case studies—a case study of a student and the team she brought together to address a national health crisis in Liberia, and a case study of educators who learned how this project could inform new approaches to global and project-based learning. Together, these cases led to a deeper understanding of how empathy—the ultimate “people-centered approach”—functions as both a tool of intercultural understanding and as an empirical research method that adds substance to short-term global experiences.

## THE PLAYERS AND THE PLOT

### **Cathy’s Story: The Genesis of the Project**

The global experiences described in this study began with the goals of one of our co-authors, a Liberian student who first envisioned this cross-cultural work in her application to The Graham Innovation Scholars program at York College.<sup>1</sup> When Cathy Cooper applied to this program, her goals were stated clearly: to earn an undergraduate degree in a healthcare field, to apply to medical schools, and then to return to her native Liberia to improve its failing healthcare system. But her application also showed the kinds of intercultural understanding that she sought as an individual. She wrote about how her fear of “the consequences of abandoning the standards of my society hampered my opportunities to grow as an individual,” noting how she worked to

*become open-minded to the beliefs of others while upholding my beliefs, thus, expanding my knowledge of the world. When I acquired this mindset, I was able to perceive my society beyond its concept of conformity and all its unaddressed inadequacies became evident. In that moment, I developed my authentic temperament. I work hard in school not in an attempt to conquer my peers but to increase my potential by improving my weaknesses personally and academically. In a like manner, my dedication to my education is intensified by my awareness of the unattainable dreams of my peers in Liberia due to the lack of educational growth in the Liberian society. For this reason, I constantly work toward achieving my goal of renewing the healthcare system in Liberia because I know if the system is not renewed, my friends and family members will continue to die hopelessly. I also realized that waiting until I became a doctor before I could give back to my home country was unreasonable....*

The program provided her with tools to do that work—an education in Design Thinking and “entrepreneurial mindset,” access to motivated mentors and students, and the resources to travel abroad. But while Cathy knew that she wanted to contribute to the renewal of the healthcare system in her native country, she did not know precisely where or how to begin this work. Though Liberian, she had not returned to her native country since she was 10 years old. As she explored her own heritage, she also found that she had internalized some of the cultural assumptions about her native land that many in the

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