

Book Review / Compte rendu

O'Shea, Joseph (2014). *Gap Year: How Delaying College Changes People in Ways the World Needs*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pages: 183. Price: 29.95 USD (paper). ISBN: 978-1-4214-1036-4.

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With many colleges and universities citing global citizenship in their mission statements or claiming global competencies as the outcome of a twenty-first-century liberal arts curriculum, the experience of a gap year has become increasingly valuable. Despite its popularity, we actually know very little about the gap year's impact upon students or host communities—until now. O'Shea suggests that the practice of taking a year (or more) away from studying to do other things, often a combination of travelling and working/volunteering abroad, can help students engage with difference and make meaning of the world or, in his words, “change people in the ways the world needs.” In exploring the educational potential of the gap year, he poses three key questions. How do gap years actually act pedagogically to help people learn? What role do gap years play in student development? And, how do students make meaning out of themselves, others, and the world (p. 7)? As little empirical research on this subject has been undertaken, O'Shea's research helps us to carefully consider the value that gap years bring to our academic institutions.

The book is usefully divided into two parts. The first part shares student stories about their gap-year experiences and illustrates what was meaningful for them. O'Shea notes how participants experienced a broad range of changes, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, civic, religious, and finally, their intellectual practices and future plans. Gap-year participation, which created opportunities of challenge and dissonance, was found to promote an “others-oriented” view of life (p. 68). These changes, along with participants' new sense of purpose, resilience, self-confidence, and interpersonal capacities, suggest to O'Shea that the gap year may improve college retention and graduation rates (p. 114). These claims are familiar to experiential learning practitioners, but may also be useful to parents, policy makers, or students themselves as they consider the value and impact of a gap-year experience.

The second part of the book situates these narratives within educational, psychological, and philosophical discourses to illustrate how gap-year participants engage in what he refers to as “civic meaning making” (p. 127–129). This is perhaps the most useful section of the book as there is little literature on the presumed benefits of the gap year and its impact on students, and even less literature that seeks to connect these findings within broader educational theories. O’Shea draws upon other theories (e.g., constructive development, college student development, civic education, and cosmopolitanism) that employ meaning making as central ideas, and he advances an umbrella theory of meaning making that requires a focus on how people make both meaning and what meanings they actually make. His key assertion is that gap-year programs help to support the formation of able citizens and help students move toward self-authorship (p. 140).

The final chapter is targeted at practitioners and develops ideas about the mechanisms through which changes in meaning making can be facilitated, as well as some of the programmatic elements in the gap year that may help or hinder meaning making. O’Shea acknowledges that not all gap years are equally educational. He provides a comprehensive overview of the elements practitioners should consider if the gap year is to be designed as a pedagogical tool, including the optimal level of challenge and support in a project, work role selection, secondary projects, integration in a country/culture, location and quality of accommodations, diversity of social networks, separation from previous environment, ideal characteristics of volunteers, opportunities for reflection, fundraising, training, duration, partners, and timing. These concrete suggestions for developing gap-year programs provide a useful framework to ensure that program providers consider more than risk management in order to maximize student learning.

O’Shea helpfully connects the literature on citizen formation with the developmental and transformational learning literatures, thereby integrating disparate fields. His framework also responds to calls for greater research in student development and literature using a more holistic, integrated approach (p. 146). Of some concern in O’Shea’s book, one of which is his acknowledgement of a lack of a mixed-methods design in the programs and the need for a greater comparative dimension (p. 167). His qualitative data is drawn exclusively from participants in a UK-based gap-year provider organization, Project Trust where in-depth interviews were conducted with only 31 students. As a result, some of his findings may be overstated. O’Shea makes some bold assertions about how a gap-year experience may result in a reduction of cultural stereotypes and prejudices (p. 88). While his narratives suggest that participants are deeply engaged with international development issues, the evidence that deep learning occurred seems somewhat anecdotal. For example, he notes that the “actual impact of the volunteers’ service to the gap-year community may have been limited” (p. 144) and development work may actually serve to reinforce notions of privilege among volunteers from the Global North. Furthermore, his assertion that a gap year may help with the healing process for those with a history of mental illness is entirely unsupported. In fairness, O’Shea acknowledges that mental health issues are complex and that no strong claims can be made, given his limited qualitative sample. Thankfully, O’Shea is aware of these limitations and others, providing insightful suggestions for future studies on gap years, such as comparing programs in different countries or with different demographics, using a more longitudinal design and a more focused analysis of particular programmatic variables, and volunteer learning (p. 167).

O’Shea’s research would also benefit from a more critical examination of access to

gap-year programs. He does acknowledge that opportunities are unequally distributed among the population and raises concerns about the for-profit emergence of gap-year providers. However, only socioeconomic issues of access are addressed and he ignores other barriers, such as disability, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, which may also restrict access to the cultural capital of a gap year. Given the apparent benefits of a gap-year experience, more attention needs to be given to access barriers to ensure that all students have access to its transformational results.

At a time when it is more challenging than ever for young people to discover their next steps, O'Shea makes a compelling argument for the value of a gap year in preparing students for the "challenges of our time". The critical question he poses for us as educators is what can we and our institutions do to promote students' meaning making? It would seem that supporting a gap year may be how we can educate not just productive workers, but cosmopolitan citizens.✻