

## [PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY]

## Ethics and Development in Mali: Civic Engagement in Art, Culture, and Education

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While it is no longer unusual for study abroad programs to include civic engagement, it is less common for these elements to be their primary focus. Michigan State University (MSU) is breaking new ground with a study abroad program that puts civic

engagement at its center: Ethics and Development in Mali. Offered since summer 2004 through the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities (<http://rcah.msu.edu>), the course brings MSU students face to face with a range of difficult ethical issues related to art, culture, and education in this West African country.

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### Ethical Questions

Mali's rich artistic, cultural, and musical traditions are admired throughout the world. But Mali is also well-known for confronting some of the most difficult development challenges of the twenty-first century, including reducing hunger, improving education, and building a functional democracy. Where harsh conditions and invigorating cultures meet, difficult ethical issues arise.

For example, offering instruction in students' native languages may be the most effective way to reach them, but it

may also disadvantage those who wish to attend the university, where French (the colonial language) is spoken. The use of traditional fabric patterns in commercial products may enhance export values while also accelerating these patterns' decline in ceremonial use. In

these situations, how does one weigh costs and benefits, and who should decide what tradeoffs are acceptable? These and other ethical issues *in* development are embedded in a larger question about the ethics *of* development. Some claim that multilateral international development strategies implemented after World War II have primarily benefited wealthy donor countries. Natural resources have flowed from poorer to richer countries, with standard manufactured goods flowing in the opposite direction. Even international food aid can put local farmers out of business and make emerging democratic processes seem less relevant to citizens.

What makes our study abroad program distinctive is its dual focus, through civic engagement, on ethical issues *in* and *of* development. Our curriculum takes into account wider criticisms *of* development without neglecting urgent problems *in* development.

### Structure of the Program

In summer 2010, thirteen MSU undergraduates participated in Ethics and Development in Mali. The program's current incarnation consists of a five-week sequence divided into three parts:

*Pre-departure class.* This intensive one-week course at MSU focused on contemporary Malian art, education, and culture. Guests included the director of the Ciwara School, a K–9 school where we would conduct our civic engagement work; an experienced study abroad teacher who has worked with American undergraduates teaching abroad in K–12 schools; two Malian undergraduates studying at the local community college and hoping to enroll at MSU; and a former Malian ambassador to the United States.

*Excursion:* On arriving in Mali, we spent one week meeting with artists, writers, and teachers and traveling around the country. We toured and studied the monuments of Bamako, Mali's capital, and its impressive National Museum. We traveled from the great mosque in Djenne to the bustling harbor of Mopti to the breathtaking cliffs of Dogon country. Finally, we participated in a workshop with the Kasobane *bogolan atelier* (a collective of mud cloth artists) and visited a women's rug collective in Segou.

*Civic Engagement:* Following excursion activities, we spent three weeks in residence at the Ciwara community school in Kati and its affiliated Institute for Popular Education (IEP). MSU students teamed up with Malian university students from the École Normale Supérieure (ENSUP) in Bamako to develop and teach English-language classes for K–9 students using active learning pedagogies. Both the pre-departure week and the excursion proved essential to helping students make sense of the customs and practices they encountered during the civic engagement portion of the trip.

While in Mali, students enrolled in six to ten credits of coursework, including a required civic engagement course connected to their collaborative teaching at the Ciwara School. In addition, students enrolled in a mix of elective courses on ethics, art, and development. All students kept a journal where they reflected on their experiences and readings, with additional writing assignments varying by elective.

## Civic Engagement Content

During the civic engagement portion of the trip, students gained firsthand insight into the ethical issue of bilingual education (*pedagogie convergente*) by working directly with Malian students and partners. Beginning around 7 a.m. each day, MSU students met with their ENSUP partners at the Ciwara school to plan lessons. They then formed teams of two to six to teach Ciwara students (with a mid-lesson recess and food break), followed by language learning (*bamanakan*) with ENSUP partners and lesson planning for the next day. After lunch, the ENSUP students returned to Bamako for classes at the university, while MSU students spent the afternoon reading, writing, and relaxing before dinner and evening reflection sessions. On weekends the group explored additional ethical questions by traveling to the local market or visiting fabric artists, dyers, or tailors, with time reserved for writing, photography, and discussions.

MSU and ENSUP partners, along with Ciwara teachers, worked in groups devoted to three distinct subjects: sports and physical education, art and music, and history and culture. Ciwara students were also divided into three groups based roughly on grade level (from 1 to 9). In Week I, the youngest students participated in sports and physical education, and the older students participated in the other two groups. In Weeks II and III, the

students rotated into new content areas. All content areas emphasized active teaching techniques (such as creative writing, dance, and music exercises), using English where appropriate.

Through this partnership, Ciwara students benefited from their instructors' enthusiasm, and MSU and ENSUP students learned how to collaborate and develop active learning techniques in a bilingual context—a particularly important outcome for the ENSUP partners, who were training to teach English at the lycée level. MSU students also gained the critical opportunity to engage firsthand with issues surrounding bilingual education while developing a context in which to consider the range of ethical topics they explored during the trip<sup>1</sup>.

## Next Steps

In working at the Ciwara School and meeting Malian artists, students did not find clear-cut answers to ethical dilemmas. If anything, their experience raised more questions. For example, if instructional language is already a complex issue, what are the consequences of adding English to the mix? Should contemporary fabric artists use bogolan symbols in stylized ways, or should they preserve traditional patterns that convey meaningful proverbial knowledge? Our students were still debating these issues as we left Mali.

Nonetheless, most students were convinced of one thing. By participating in this program, they had incurred new ethical obligations. Some talked about staying in touch with their ENSUP



ENSUP partners Aliou Sigué and Isaac Kodio work with students on an active learning exercise. (Photo by Leila Chatti)

partners or helping the Ciwara school after the program ended. Some are considering returning to Mali after graduation. Others want to share their knowledge with peers and family members to help dispel stereotypes about sub-Saharan Africa. In sum, students left Mali not only with a better understanding of the complexity of ethical issues, but with more confidence and greater commitment to working with Malians to address them. ☐

*Editor's note: Stephen Esquith participated in MSU's Core Commitments Leadership Consortium team. To read about one student's experience with Ethics and Development in Mali, see Leila Chatti's article on page 15.*

<sup>1</sup> The Ciwara School's staff members were instrumental to the program's success. Principal Michel Zerbo, Ciwara classroom teachers, and Peace Corps Volunteers Scotty Fay and Yik Lam provided advice and managed the program's daily administrative work—an extraordinary task, given that the program involved thirteen MSU students, seventeen ENSUP partners, and between 150 and 200 Ciwara students. Cheick Oumar Coulibaly and Debbie Fredo, leaders of the Ciwara school, and Maria Diarra, director of the Institute for Popular Education, also made invaluable contributions to the program.