



## Research that Reaches Out Podcast

### Episode 13: Learning on Steroids with Dr. Eimad Houry & Dr. Mary Alice Morgan

Hannah Nabi: Hello, and welcome to the Research that Reaches Out podcast from Mercer University. I'm your host, Hannah Vann Nabi. Research that Reaches Out is an initiative at Mercer University in Macon, GA that was launched in 2015 as part of Mercer's Quality Enhancement Plan, or QEP. We work with faculty and students to help them integrate service and research to address real-world problems affecting our communities at the local, regional, national, and global levels.

Today we have the pleasure of speaking with Dr. Mary Alice Morgan and Dr. Eimad Houry from Mercer University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences faculty. Dr. Morgan is a professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies, and she just recently returned to full-time teaching after serving for twelve years as the Senior Vice Provost for Service-Learning at Mercer. Dr. Houry is a professor of political science and chair of the international affairs program, and he previously chaired the international and global studies department.

Over the past twelve years, Dr. Houry and Dr. Morgan have led six service-learning study abroad programs for Mercer students in Cape Town, South Africa. The program they lead is part of an institutional initiative at Mercer called Mercer on Mission (or as we like to call it, MOM). MOM supports faculty-led, service-learning study abroad and covers all travel expenses so that students only have to pay for tuition. With each program, Dr. Morgan and Dr. Houry establish partnerships on the ground and develop service projects based on community-identified needs. They've developed an impressive process for preparing students for learning that is guided by ethical engagement and critical reflection, as well as cultural humility, and I'm really excited to get to learn from them today about how they approach community engagement in a study abroad context.

Welcome to you both.

Eimad Houry: Thank you , Hannah

Hannah Nabi: So let's start with a little background on your Mercer on Mission trip to Cape Town, South Africa. Tell us a little bit about the program.

Mary Alice Morgan: So the program has had several manifestations. However, we have worked with one primary community liaison, Anwar Parker, over several trips. And for each of the projects that we've had, the ,again the need has been identified by our community partners. So they have ranged from, on our very first trip, we were originally asked to help a drama club at a township high school. And you have to understand when I say township high school, it is in an impoverished area, I guess best described as they had something like 700 students but could only feed about 400 each day. So that gives you some

sense of the deprivation that they were going through, but managing, managing beautifully to educate their students.

So originally they asked us to help their drama club perform a Shakespearean play. And I have to admit that my first reaction was, you're not able to feed all of your students, but you want the drama club to perform Shakespeare? It just seemed out of keeping, but once we arrived, we understood the love of poetry and song and the amazing talents of these students. We didn't, in fact, focus on Shakespeare after all, but we did expose them to some contemporary documentary drama in which there were different vignettes of people telling about their lives. And the students were so taken with it that they ran with it. They said, we want to produce our own play that shows vignettes of our lives here in the townships, so that's exactly what they did. With some coaching, drama coaching from some of the students in our group. And the performance was really remarkable. That was a partnership that that we did twice.

Eimad Houry:

So the last couple of times we organized the program, we did variations on debate. We were asked by the schools where we worked to work with their students on improving communication skills, leadership skills, research skills, and writing skills. And so we thought debate would be the great, a great forum or format, through which they could explore all of these competencies and work on improving them through something that is fun and entertaining. So the first time we did debate, we actually did like a straightforward debate because we had an award winning debater on our team who was able to kind of help us organize and put in place the guidelines that we needed in order to make this a legitimate and also very effective debate experience for the students.

And then the second time we did that, we did a variation on debate through the Model United Nations program where we had students essentially research different countries and different topics or issues and, in connection with these countries, formulate positions or opinions on what these countries would do in response to these challenges. And then, of course, convene the simulation conference where they would stand up and each give a short speech and also of course make an effort to try to persuade other delegations to see things their way, to kind of effectively come on their side in terms of the way that they propose dealing with these problems that they've identified.

So it's been an incredibly enriching experience because we have worked with different schools, we've done different things that I think it's safe to say that these were outside of my comfort zone. I'm not, I wasn't trying to be a debater or to coach debate or maybe drama, for sure, or do dance, for example. So all of those things have been fun but challenging experiences for me, and I've grown tremendously as a person and also as a faculty member.

Hannah Nabi:

I think that's a really interesting point that you bring up about, you know, a lot of times we'll talk about student learning, but about faculty learning and

growth. And each of you, you know, Mary Alice, you mentioned being surprised about being asked on your first trip to do theater, right, and we're going to talk a little bit about savior attitudes a little later. But I think that's a really good example of sort of paternalistic ideas and frameworks for doing this work. But then, too, Eimad, just about your own challenging yourself to learn more and sort of prepare to lead students in this. How, if you can elaborate on that Eimad, and then also chime in Mary Alice, how have you grown as a faculty member, you know, what kinds of lessons have you learned or experiences have you had that you brought back into your classrooms on campus?

Eimad Houry:

I don't think I can underestimate just how profound these experiences have been on me as a professional, both in the classroom and also in terms of my own areas of interest of research and study. I have been teaching about development, in theory at least, in the classroom for quite some time before I set foot in Cape Town, South Africa for the first time in 2008. I had traveled extensively throughout the developing world, I guess you could say. But those experiences were largely personal ones and not really intended for sort of engaging development type situations or issues, at least not intentionally. They may have happened, but, you know, kind of by accident or just because I was in the right place at the right time.

But ultimately, the experience of going to Cape Town and meeting people living in the kinds of conditions that Mary Alice described earlier, deprived of any sense of material comfort that we associate with modern life and yet being incredibly gracious and also optimistic and motivated to excel and to do things, to do things to the best of their abilities. The kids that we met and that we interacted with, we learned so much from because here they are, with all of these incredible limitations and obstacles and constraints that they have to deal with. Not to mention the tragedy and the suffering that was occurring at the same time, in terms of their personal lives. And it was that, you know, there was so much to learn from them in terms of what we could take away from their attitudes and how they cope with these conditions.

Time after time after time, we and the students reflected on just how amazing they are considering where they are and the conditions they are dealing with. So it opened my eyes to a whole new dimension of development that I bring into the classroom all the time. And deliberately try to make a point to students repeatedly, that poor people are deprived of materialism, but they're not deprived of intelligence or capacity. If you give them the right resources, if you allow them or give them the opportunity to be able to demonstrate what they can do, they will excel. They will be able to do it well because they have a lot of great ideas. It's just that they don't have the means or the opportunity with which to apply those ideas. And this is what I want my students to take away from development courses, is an understanding that poverty doesn't

mean desperation or essentially lack of agency or lack of capacity to bring about change. Poverty means just not having the material resources or the opportunity to be able to accomplish those things.

Mary Alice Morgan: Yeah, I'll just echo that, and use one example to illustrate. Again, this is one of the earlier trips, and we were helping the students write these vignettes so that they could then perform them. And then they turned around and began to teach us traditional dance, traditional songs, spoken word poetry. So in other words, it was a mutual exchange. It was not me or our group coming in to teach them something that they didn't have the capacities to learn, it was instead a very mutual sharing of the kind of art, spirituality, and just mutual understanding as human beings that we could offer one another. So that was really one of the most resounding benefits to the program for me personally as well as professionally.

Hannah Nabi: So both of you are teaching courses in Cape Town that you've also taught on campus, or similar type courses. So I'm wondering, how does student learning differ, if at all, for students who are taking the courses abroad versus students who are taking the courses on campus?

Eimad Houry: I think, there's one specific example that I think drives the point home, which is that when we meet with our group before we leave the country to go to South Africa, we read quite a bit about South African history and South African literature and South African, sort of, contemporary affairs and contemporary challenges. And the students, of course, are students. They are engaged to a degree. They kind of relate to some of the things that are happening, but in a very abstract way. But there's really no better way to kind of, sort of engrave those ideas in their, in their minds, other than seeing it and experiencing it.

So, over and over again, Mary Alice and I keep telling them how this country suffers from extreme inequality, and of course they nod and sometimes they feel sad or kind of unhappy that this is the situation. But it's another experience altogether when they actually get into the country and literally stand in an area where on one side, they see luxury accommodations and the epitome of this modern sort of comforts life. And then on the other side, they see utter deprivation where the most basic necessities like clean water and toilets and sanitation are completely lacking altogether. And then it kind of dawns on them, just the extent of the gap, really, that separates people. Oftentimes by just the fence. On one side of the fence, you've got one world and another side of the fence, you have an entirely different world, and that drives the inequity point home. And that, I think, is the best way to demonstrate to students the damage that inequality can do.

It's one thing to talk about the fact that, you know, wealth and income is concentrated and privilege is vested in one particular group in society, but it's another to actually show it happening and continuing to happen decades after it was not supposed to happen anymore. Because these are structural

problems that are very difficult to fix. And there are so many impediments and obstacles that have to be overcome to begin to steer it in the right direction, let alone actually get anything accomplished.

Mary Alice Morgan: The other thing that I would add is that when students are there within the country, not only do they begin to recognize the realities Eimad just described within South Africa, but that experience also leads them to reflect on all the things that they've taken for granted all of their lives, and including what education is all about. So they feel more impelled to apply themselves to the study that we're doing. It becomes much more integrated as part of their life, not just an intellectual enterprise. And the reflections that they have about privileges they've always assumed, education they've taken for granted, is profound. And it's the sort of thing that you don't have in a flash. You've got to absorb it and ruminate upon it. And that's the kind of education that then, you know, changes your entire way of being in the world. And it's not just for the duration of the course. I mean, students come back to that again and again, alumni of the program come back to that again and again. That it really changes their perspective on being a global citizen. Causes them to think about America's role internationally. It sounds cliché, but it is literally true. It is life changing.

Hannah Nabi: So y'all talked about, particularly helping students sort of come to a better understanding and appreciation for structural inequality and what that actually means and what it looks like. And a lot of these are lessons that, you know, our service-learning courses on our campus in Macon strive to incorporate through service-learning domestically. And one of the great things about Mercer on Mission, and Mary Alice, you had a strong hand in making this happen, that all of the Mercer On Mission trips are service-learning courses. So with service-learning and that component, how does service-learning in a study abroad context in Cape Town compare with a service-learning class in Macon? Do you notice differences or changes in the way students engage? What does that look like?

Mary Alice Morgan: I'm going to have two paradoxical answers to that. One is that, again, being abroad and in conditions that the students have never encountered before, that defamiliarization makes them more inquisitive, reflective, and so it's like learning on steroids. You know, it just they feel propelled and impelled to absorb as much as they can. Without that element with the service-learning here in Macon, ironically enough, in some ways, I think students are much more likely to take a charity point of view on the service that they're doing because this is something they're familiar with doing with churches, perhaps, with service organizations. They've been required to do quote unquote mandatory volunteerism in high school, that sort of thing, it's routine. And so, because it's routine, they're not really reflecting on it. They're not questioning it. It's not changing their perspective on the world at all. So I think you have to work, I actually think, ironically, you have to work a lot harder to help

students get out of that charity mindset with domestic service-learning than you do with international service-learning.

Hannah Nabi: Can you explain a little bit about what you mean by that charity mindset and how that's different than what you see in Cape Town?

Mary Alice Morgan: The charity mindset is, I'm coming in to do for you what you can't do for yourself. It puts the doer, the charity giver, in a position over the person who's receiving whatever the service is. And since many students come from a background in which most of their needs have been met, financially as well as personally, that's a position they're very accustomed to. And and it's a very satisfying position, right. It makes you feel good. You've done something good for somebody else. But oftentimes they haven't questioned structural reasons for that need in the first place. Why is there structural poverty? Why is there structural racism? It's just been an element normalized within all of their experiences.

So, again, what I would say is students who have been on the South Africa trip, for example, come back with such a much more acute understanding of structural racism in the United States and the ways in which it parallels that in a country that they have always thought of as being a prime example of racism, extreme racism. Which it is, historically, but they suddenly recognize the parallels in the United States, and that is a shock and something that they then have to really confront.

Hannah Nabi: Ok so, so now I don't want to miss out on the opportunity to talk to you sort of about the administrative tasks or processes of doing a service-learning study abroad program. You mentioned that you work with an agency on the ground in Cape Town that sort of helps you get connected and navigate that. But how do you go about, how did you establish that partnership? You know, and thinking about it in terms of, if you're speaking to faculty who may or may not be at Mercer who are interested in doing international faculty led study abroad service-learning, service-learning study abroad – it's a lot of words there. Um, but who are intimidated by all of the unknowns.

Eimad Houry: Yeah, I think that makes it even more fun, the unknowns. It's an opportunity to kind of learn about the country and understand where the challenges are and add to the best of your ability to kind of find partners. So nowadays with access to the internet, just about everybody has got some kind of an online presence. Oftentimes it's misleading because they don't check it, but sometimes they do and so it works out. But in our case, it started with Dr. Craig McMahan, the director of Mercer On Mission, going to Cape Town and making connections with an organization called Sharko which was a student-run organization associated with the University of Cape Town. And fortunately we happened to meet an individual who, at the time, was working for the organization who became a partner with us for all the years that

followed, even though he left Sharko shortly after we did our first program with them.

So it's, I wouldn't say it was a, it was deliberate or planned. It's just that this organization had a presence online, and because of that presence, it presented itself as like an organization that can partner with international actors or international institutions that are interested in doing something in Cape Town. And so that's probably where it needs to start, is to, if you can't go physically to the country and meet with people and talk about the possibilities, then definitely send a lot of emails and explore, you know, what, where the needs are and what kinds of ways you can help advance the ways in which those needs can be met.

Mary Alice Morgan: I'll just add that we were fortunate in that the partner, Anwar Parker, that we worked with really understands service-learning and internationalism, so in other words we were not simply parachuting into a place, doing some sort of a project, and then leaving. And he really understood the need for mutuality and reciprocity in planning the service, in making sure that again, it isn't just a matter of coming in and performing something, you know, painting a house or providing food, that there was going to be real, not only intellectual interactions but then kind of emotional and social interactions. And so again, that made the experience so much richer than it would have been if it had been an instrumental kind of simply project-based learning. He really understand the full power of multi-dimensional learning.

Hannah Nabi: Workload wise, how much time does it take you to establish a plan, you know, to, and I know y'all were supposed to go this past summer, but because of the pandemic were not able to. I don't know if you're – well hopefully in another two years, we'll be able to travel the world again. But how much lead time does it take, particularly as you mentioned Mary Alice, that, you know, focusing on that mutual reciprocity, mutual benefit is so important, and I know in domestic service-learning that, you know, tacks on an extra couple of months of project partnership planning, just to make sure that everybody's at the table that should be and voices are heard and needs and goals incorporated. So what does that look like when you scale that out for an international partnership?

Mary Alice Morgan: Can I say it depends? I mean, again, it depends on the partner that you're working with and the nature of the project. So if it is an instrumental project, then you can, you know, gather whatever materials you need, go in, and as long as you have permitting and vaccination and those sorts of things, you know, you could complete your project and it could be, you know as simple as the project is. But if what you're trying to do is establish the human connection that creates a kind of global citizenship, a depth of connection, then it's going to take you longer.

Eimad Houry: Let me also say that, because the students that have joined our programs have come from different backgrounds, and not just personally but of course

also academically – you have business students, you have science students, you have humanities, you have social sciences. So that's another dimension to the experience that you have to kind of navigate, and I think it's more challenging internationally than it would be domestically. Most of the students that come into the program have not, have had no background or introduction to the country before. They know nothing, absolutely nothing about the country. And so you have to work that up for weeks and months ahead of the travel day in order to arrive prepared, intellectually at least, to be able to observe and absorb and process what's going on around you.

So in that respect, there is that additional major step, essentially, that you have to take in order to prepare the group for the task. Not, not just in relation to the specific project that we're working with, because that's another area of preparation that they have to work on typically, but definitely the country itself, learning about the country, its people, its history, its conditions. All that has to be done in a matter of a few weeks or a couple of months before we leave. And we do it that way voluntarily. We essentially meet with the group to learn about the country as much as possible, even though we're not actually teaching an official course. So we meet with them just so that we know that by the time we are prepared to leave, we have given our students the tools that they need to be able to understand and appreciate that experience.

Hannah Nabi: That is a perfect segue into my next question which is about your pre departure preparation. And I know y'all have a pretty robust recruitment and selection process, I believe you do interviews. So what, um, tell us a little bit about that process and how you've developed it over the years.

Eimad Houry: I wish I could say that there was a plan to that, but there wasn't. It was kind of, uh, it happened as it, as we went. First of all, the realization that our program was popular. And so we essentially were in a position to be able to be more selective. So that's, that's where the need for interviewing happened, but I think after the first trip, there was also, Mary Alice and I both agreed that we really do have to be very deliberate in a way that we select you know future students for the programs. Because students with the wrong attitude can definitely derail the whole experience. So we try through the interview process, as much as we use it to learn about them, but we also want them to hear from us that this is a very serious endeavor. This is not about taking a trip to South Africa to see the sights, you know, to kind of experience the country in a fun way and drink and all that kind of stuff. But this is, this is a serious service-learning experience that they have to be prepared to invest in, and we expect them to essentially be dedicated to the work that they're supposed to be doing on a regular basis, so that I think is really important. And so we use the interviewing opportunity as a way of communicating with the students and letting them know that we're very serious about what we're doing.



Hannah Nabi: And Eimad, you mentioned a few times in our conversation about, you know, making sure students are educated about the history of the country, the politics. Why is that important?

Eimad Houry: I can't, I mean, I think the the the question should be why isn't that required of every program? Because I, my understanding is that most programs don't do that, that most programs are perfectly content, essentially, picking students up on the morning the flights are scheduled and leaving and doing the work, because the work is what matters. And not so much, essentially, the climate or the environment or the cultures that define the location. By virtue of the kinds of issues Mary Alice and I discuss in our classes, I cannot imagine that we would take up those questions or those issues without some kind of extensive background on the country. Because when we talked about racism, injustice, and inequality and deprivation and poverty, I mean, these are social issues that have complicated roots. And if you don't understand the context in which they're happening and the history behind them, you're not really going to appreciate the current situation and what, if anything, can be done about it in order to begin to kind of reverse those conditions. So I just cannot imagine us doing what we're doing without having introduced students extensively to the background, the country's history, its economics, its culture, its norms, all those kinds of things.

Mary Alice Morgan: I'll just add that, and I think part of what you're getting at Hannah in asking the question, is the whole issue of voluntourism, which is becoming very popular and remunerative for the companies that do it. Which enables, you know, students to go swim with manatees on an ecological week-long tour. But again, they're, they're not embedded in understanding, necessarily, not only environment, but the politics and the whole global process of being from a quote unquote first world country that's going perhaps to a developing country. So again, you know, those issues of privilege and inequality. So we, we are determined that the trips that we do are not going to be voluntourism.

The other thing that I would say is that, actually ironically, a lot of times our students have, midway through the trip, begun to reflect on the banners that we have here on campus at Mercer – everyone majors in changing the world. And, you know, I think that's a, that's a genuine aspiration that we have. But they also begin to question it. That is not an easy thing to do. And it takes more than simply showing up with your resources that you can give to somebody else. It takes understanding global responsibility, so I you know I think that's, that's one of the aspects that we take very seriously.

Hannah Nabi: So let's talk about savior attitudes. I mean, I don't I don't think we can't not talk about savior attitudes, but, you know, a common criticism of international service, or voluntourism, as you said, Mary Alice, is that it reinforces a paternalistic idea that Westerners are saviors of the world and we know what's best for everyone. And going back to what you were talking about at the beginning of our conversation Eimad, you know, this idea that, you know, people who are poor don't have agency or aren't smart enough to handle

their own problems. And that's not true at all. How do you take this savior attitudes idea into account when you talk to students during the recruitment and selection process, and then in your pre departure preparation and then again, you know, while you're in country. And then after you get home. It's sort of a continuum, right, so what does that look like?

Eimad Houry:

So we make it very clear from day one that we're not going to save anyone. And plus, the idea that you could possibly make any kind of lasting difference in the lives of people in three weeks is preposterous. And especially when we're dealing with very complicated situations, things that have been lingering for generations. We're not going to be able to fix a school, we're not going to be able to fix the resources in the school, the teaching style of the school. We're not going to be able to fix the system of education, I mean we can't fix anything in that period of time.

So we make it very clear from day one that this is an extension of the Mercer education experience, that this is really more about them learning than about them saving anyone or essentially transforming any particular place that we're going to visit, whether it's a school or a community. So you have to go with a very humble attitude, that you're there to learn, to learn about yourself and to understand more than anything else, really. It's an educational experience. And it's a transformative experience, but not to the community, but to themselves above all, so that's one thing.

The other thing that we try to do is, and this is kind of, we demonstrate it to the students that we take, is that we try to give the group that we work with as much ownership of what we're doing as possible. You know, Mary Alice talked about the drama group, the vignettes that we put together with them, ultimately were their choices. They're the ones who told us what topics they want to take up in those, you know, skits that they put together. They're the ones who essentially constructed the dialogue based on the experiences that they had with their own community. When we did debate, we didn't come in and say we're going to debate XY and Z because we think that's a good debate topic for you guys. We sat with the kids, and we talked, and we kind of hammered out a number of different ideas and ultimately we let them decide what they wanted to debate, and so they took ownership of that because it resonated with them. This is something that they really wanted to talk about. Even with the Model UN when we, when we pick the issues that these countries are going to negotiate over, the issues were decided by the students, not by us. Not our students, the students that we worked with in Cape Town.

So each of these situations, I think, is a clear example of how we're offering technical advice, but we're not really taking over. We're not sort of imposing our worldview in any deliberate way. And we're also going in with the humble understanding that we're there to learn and listen more than anything else.

Hannah Nabi:

Our conversation's coming to an end. And I always like to close out each episode by asking our guests the same question. So I'll pose it to you. I'd like

you to leave us with your thoughts on why Mercer On Mission: Cape Town is Research That Reaches Out?

Mary Alice Morgan: So Research That Reaches Out, we have a very elaborate rubric for the learning goals, and they include things like ethics and self reflection. So in other words, again, it's not simply research in the way we traditionally think of it, as a project that's going to create a new scientific breakthrough or some other form of research. Instead it, Mercer on Missions, at least that I've been associated with, have been that kind of direct interaction within the larger context of global development, cultural humility, etc. that then is expanded, so it is less about product and more about process.

Eimad Houry: Yeah, I totally agree, and I think the Research That Reaches Out element of the program surfaces very early in the student experiences because once we decide what project we're going to do, generally, most of us are not really equipped to carry out that project intrinsically. We have to kind of study up or basically learn about what it takes in order to navigate the kind of project that we want to accomplish in the time that we're there. And so the research that's being done, the learning that's being done is really tied directly to the service that's being provided in the end. So the reaching out part is to be able to deliver that service, not only to the best of our ability, but also in a way that that makes a lasting impact in the community where we, where we serve.

Mary Alice Morgan: And I'll just add, in talking about the impact, I mean, that really is the the reaching out part, right. So, for example, the theatre group. Because we raised funds in addition to going over and helping them write that play, they were then able to enter some play competitions there within Cape Town and, ultimately, they not only won at the local level, but then the regional level, and then the province level. Who would have thought that they could have gone that far? Similarly with the Model UN, we were able to leave behind some notebooks, computer notebooks that, because the students were so enthusiastic about the research that they had done on the different countries, that then they were able to carry on without us after we left. And that's, that's exactly what you would want to have happen.

Hannah Nabi: Well thank you both, Dr. Mary Alice Morgan and Dr. Eimad Houry, for speaking with us today. And thank you to our listeners for tuning in to this episode of the Research That Reaches Out podcast at Mercer University. You can check us out on our website at [QEP.mercer.edu](http://QEP.mercer.edu) and subscribe to our show at [SoundCloud.com](https://www.soundcloud.com).