Reflections on a visit to Cuba

by Gregory Mason

In June 2004, a group of 18 Gustavus professors from a range of disciplines paid a 10-day visit to Cuba to investigate "The Successes and Challenges of the Cuban Revolution." We were funded by the Faculty Development Program, which is supported by a grant from the Bush Foundation, and by the Gustavus Center for Vocational Reflection. Our goals were to observe first-hand the current condition of the country, meet some of its people, and experience its culture. Our hosts and guides in Cuba were from the Martin Luther King Junior Memorial Center in Havana, a faith-based organization with a strong outreach in community education and social justice concerns.

Ours was one of the last short-term educational groups to be allowed to travel to Cuba before the current U.S. government regulations limiting such travel were enforced. Soon after our arrival, it became clear to me, at least, that there is no economic or political justification for the continuing trade embargo against Cuba. It may even be giving the Castro regime a blanket excuse or cover for its own policy failures. To set foot on Cuba is to encounter not a political or military threat but an impoverished island nation, its infrastructure badly run down, struggling hard to meet the basic needs of its people.

During our visit, we had the opportunity to interact with a wide range of individuals and groups, and we were greeted with warmth and curiosity wherever we went. For all Cuba's current difficulties, we encountered no beggars, shoeless children in rags, or child mothers on the streets, as are sadly often seen in comparable Caribbean and Central American settings. The people looked healthy, well nourished though rarely overweight, and often with startlingly even, bright white teeth. We visited maternity and neighborhood care clinics, as well as a large AIDS treatment center. We also learned about Cuba's successful literacy campaign in 1960, to teach every person in the coun-

Eighteen members of the Gustavus faculty participated in the Faculty Development Program's third international social justice trip, traveling to Cuba for 10 days in June 2004. Pictured from left are Priscilla Briggs, assistant professor of art; Jon Grinnell, assistant professor of biology; Jean Lavigne, assistant professor of geography; Terry Morrow, associate professor of communication studies; Anne-Marie Gronhovd, professor of French; Ellen Riordan, visiting assistant professor of communication studies; Steve Griffith, professor of theatre and dance; the group's Cuban guide; Bronwen Wickkiser, assistant professor of classics; Sujay Rao, assistant professor of history; Amy Seham, associate professor of theatre and dance; Greg Mason, professor of English; Elizabeth Baer, professor of English; Pamela Kittelson, assistant professor of biology; Mary Solberg, associate professor of religion; Nancy Hanway, associate professor of Spanish; Tom Emmert, professor of history; Deborah Pitton, associate professor of education; and Paula Swiggum, associate professor of nursing.

try to read and write within one year. I met a professor of physics from the University of Havana who had been a 15-year-old member of this "army of literacy teachers." He proudly showed me a black-and-white photo of himself as an earnest teenager, in fatigues and beret, teaching a family of farmers seated at their kitchen table. These are achievements of which the Cuban revolution is proud. For all its failures to produce a consumer-oriented economy, and its curtailments of individual rights, Cuba has delivered free basic health care and adequate food, shelter, and literacy to all its citizens.

Our hosts were also ready to admit to the revolution's failures. Regarding religion, the Cuban revolution first showed little tolerance for those who wished to practice their religious faiths. However, Pope John Paul II's 1998 visit marked a turning point. Castro's government recognized that Cubans are still a very religious people and that their diverse spirituality needs to be respected. Cuba also shares with the rest of Latin America a deep-seated homophobia, even though the more progressive elements of the society see this as reactionary and anti-humanitarian. The country sees itself in an ongoing process of educating its citizenry toward more enlightened attitudes. AIDS patients were first also forced to relocate to quarantined camps, a drastic measure, although the fact remains that Cuba has managed to contain the spread of AIDS to an adult prevalence rate of 0.3 percent, compared to 6 percent in neighboring Haiti. The harmful influence of corruption was likewise acknowledged, albeit corruption "only at the lower levels." In a controlled one-party state with a command economy and chronic shortages, patronage, graft, and special privileges for party members are likely chronic. We were left wondering how much of Cuba's failures could be blamed on corruption compared to, say, the U.S. trade embargo.

Faculty members Mary Solberg (second from left), Pamela Kittelson (fourth from left), Nancy Hanway (holding cane up), and Amy Seham (extreme right) visit with workers in a sugar cane plot maintained in an urban agricultural garden cooperative in Havana.

What did it feel like to be in Cuba in June 2004? First of all, there is the Cuban music, which seems to be breaking out everywhere, warm, rhythmic, and infectious. It is hard not to feel looser and happier in this enveloping ambience. It also felt like being in a time warp. A great many of the cars are vintage 1950s and earlier American models, lumbering, brightly painted, and somewhat surrealistic. On the streets of Havana the traffic is light, with little feel of an urban rush. Buildings designed in an ambitious, neocolonial style, are in faded, stained, and paint-peeled condition. This time warp came through even more strongly on a two-day trip to the western province of Piñar del Rio. By the roadside one morning, I watched a procession of horse-drawn buggies, bicycles, an occasional motorbike, and a lone car take the nearby town to work in the fields. Instead of tractors there were ox teams. On a tobacco cooperative, our 60-year-old farmer host told us how his father and he had been sharecroppers on this farm at the time of the revolution, and how they and others had then been "awarded' the farm when the owners fled the country. This obviously raised questions in our minds, both about the conditions they must have worked under before the revolution and about the fairness of the settlement following it.

As we tried to adjudicate "the successes and challenges of the Cuban revolution," it became clear that the ongoing meaning of "the Revolution" in Cuba is open to debate. How long is a revolution supposed to last? Most of those we met have known only Fidel

Castro's Cuba. They have grown up with the revolution and have aged with it. They are family, and as such they are committed to it, for better or for worse. For example, our guide, our translator, and our bus driver were each warm, intelligent, and complex individuals. They were not looking for ways to leave their country; but they were still committed to improving it, still committed to "the Revolution." But especially since the beginning of the "special period" of austerity, following the withdrawal of Soviet Union support in 1989, daily life has been an increasingly hard struggle for the Cuban people, taxing even to their resourcefulness and good humor. National pride is matched with discontent. Everyone imagined that by now, years—decades—after the revolution, the Cuban people would be enjoying its hard-earned fruits, instead of having to endure a seemingly endless round of further shortages and sacrifices, their children no better off than they were. Exhaustion, rather than disillusion, might be the word that characterizes the mood of many of the loyal Cubans who spoke frankly with us about their homeland and its present prospects.

Cuba now appears to have put its faith in an expansion of its tourist industry, to generate much needed foreign revenue. While an influx of one to two million tourists annually would help Cuba's economy greatly, the repercussions upon the social fabric would be enormous. The egalitarian character of post-revolutionary Cuba is already being tested by the current policy of effectively segregating the economically struggling Cuban nationals from the pampered foreign tourists. Many tourism opportunities are closed to the Cuban people in their own country. More broadly, tourism has a tainted legacy on the island, dating back to Cuba's many years as a United States playground for gambling and prostitution. It is difficult to imagine that a big upsurge in tourism will not bring with it an array of corrosive consequences.

Cuba currently operates on a dual currency system, the Cuban peso and the American dollar. Officially, the exchange rate is 1 to 1, but the actual rate is about 26 pesos to one U.S. dollar. Those connected to the recently revived tourist industry are earning U.S. dollars, while "average" Cubans are living on the peso economy. For many basic items, the local buying power of the peso is considerable. Cubans can buy rice, flour, and cooking oil very reasonably at state-run *bodegas,* and one peso, worth four U.S. cents, will buy a palatable cigar or admission to a movie theater. With the trade embargo, however, many items are unavailable at the state stores. Often, toiletries and a whole range of "typical" consumer products are only available at "dollar stores," which accept only U.S. dollars. This has resulted in a sharp disparity in the spending power of those earning U.S. dollars versus those earning Cuban pesos. For instance, the deputy director of the large AIDS clinic we visited, a recognized international authority, informed me that he earns less than any hotel porter who receives daily tips in dollars.

There is much speculation as to what kind of political and economic system will ensue after Fidel Castro. A recent Rand Corporation study, *Cuba After Castro,* lists four key factors that will be in play: its disaffected youth, its aging population, its racism, and its repressed private sector. Doubtless, each of these issues will play a role, but curiously they did not impress us during our visit. We encountered a vital, hospitable people eager for contact with the United States, ready to be rid of the harsh trade embargo. We certainly glimpsed Cuba's problems and continuing failures, but equally we admired the pride, energetic

A Visit to the Burgess Shale—Integrating Experiential Learning into the Classroom

Paleontology's version of the Dead Sea Scrolls, First Folio of Shakespeare, and Yankee Stadium is the Burgess Shale of the Canadian Rockies, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Assistant Professor of Geology **Russell Shapiro** spent a week there this summer, funded by a Faculty Development mini-grant, in order to bring the field to his students in his paleontology course. He has rebuilt the course, moving from a textbook-driven curriculum to a project-based curriculum. Shapiro used the time spent in the field to establish connections with Parks-Canada, the Burgess Shale Geoscience Foundation (the only group permitted to bring visitors to the site), and logistical centers in Field, British Columbia, with the goal of eventually offering Gustavus students the opportunity to take a field trip to the locality.

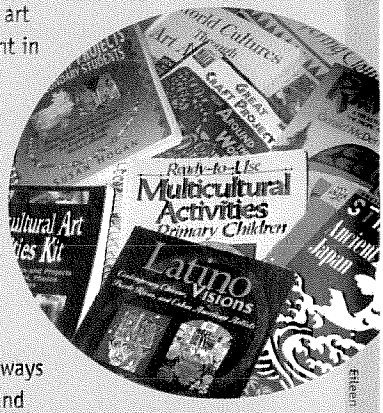
The fossils in the Burgess Shale are important for several reasons. Firstly, the deposit represents a "lagerstatten," meaning soft parts as well as hard parts are preserved. Lagerstatten of this quality are extremely rare in the fossil record (though most common during the Early and Middle Cambrian periods). By studying the fossils, students can act as true paleobiologists, teasing out the internal organs, tissues, and other features typically lost to time. Secondly, the Burgess Shale is Middle Cambrian in age, about 500 million years old, or very close to the base of the oldest animals. Therefore, the deposit allows access to see how the earliest animals may have looked—even organisms that had no skeletons! Thirdly, this deposit has been used as the "spokesperson" for many disparate entities that have a stake in the fossil record, including evolutionists, creationists, [Canadian] nationalists, and preservation environmentalists. Taken together, there is no other deposit on Earth that matches the Burgess Shale for importance.

good humor, and resiliency of Cuba's people, and witnessed their considerable successes. Before our arrival, we had been warned to expect frequent power outages and possible water shortages, but only once did we suffer a brief electrical outage. And despite the hardships Cuba is currently experiencing, our group was cared for extremely well throughout our trip. Those of us who had hoped to shed some pounds in a Spartan socialist regime were disappointed, as we enjoyed delicious meals, served family style, of fresh produce, poultry, and pork. In a world of increasing homogenization, Cuba remains distinctively different. It is a country we can learn from. Those of us who believe in education find this a cause for celebration and a reason to strengthen our ties with Cuba in whatever ways we can.

Greg Mason, who has taught in the English department at the College since 1971, was one of 18 members of the faculty who participated in the Service-Learning for Social Justice visit to Cuba, the Faculty Development Program's third such international travel program.

Understanding culture through art

With a growing number of diverse cultures present in K–12 classrooms today, it is important that all students feel represented in the classroom curriculum. **Lois Peterson**, associate professor of art and art history, has made sure that her courses include art resource materials to assist education students to write and develop lesson plans in the visual arts that are based in a culture other than their own. Through funding from the Faculty Development Program, students are able to utilize a variety of materials, including resource books and videos covering art techniques, forms, and styles present in a wide array of cultures.



Eileen Holz

While all cultures share some elements of commonality, there also exists a certain set of characteristics unique to individual cultures. By studying the unique art of a culture, students are able to understand the concerns of a particular culture. Through understanding also comes acceptance of ways that are different from one's own, and through acceptance comes the breaking down of barriers that can cause a fractured society. Each semester every student in "Art Education" (AR248) develops and presents four multicultural lesson plans and examples of projects they have developed for an elementary classroom. Through the development and sharing of culturally inclusive art lessons, our students are better prepared to meet the needs of the culturally diverse classroom.

Teaching and learning historically

Through a Faculty Development departmental mini-grant, the Department of History is hoping to better understand the relationship between how Gustavus history faculty teach historical thinking and what majors and non-majors in their courses (especially in introductory and level-two courses) in fact do and do not learn from those methods about thinking historically. They also hope to improve the effectiveness of their methods so as to more reliably foster mature, or deeper and more sophisticated, "historical cognition" (the process of thinking and learning about the past) on the part of their students.

Last year, department faculty engaged in a series of conversations revolving around Sam Wineburg's award-winning book, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching about the Past* (Temple, 2001). Wineburg, professor of cognitive studies in education and adjunct professor of history at the University of Washington, Seattle, argues that to be effective teachers of history, teachers need first to understand—as concretely as possible on the basis of current empirical evidence—how history is taught and learned, and, more specifically, what approaches to and knowledge about the past both professors and students bring to that complex teaching-learning relationship. As he writes, "I try to show that historical thinking, in its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development. Its achievement, I argue, actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think, one of the reasons why it is much easier to learn names, dates, and stories than it is to change the basic mental structures we use to grasp the meaning of the past."

Gustavus history faculty also created sets of exercises modeled on those used by Wineburg that are now used in selected courses at all levels, including their one required course, "Thinking Historically," to gather information about how they teach and how their students learn historical thinking. This spring, Wineburg will visit the Gustavus campus to continue the conversation with faculty and students, with the goal of developing deeper historical thinking among more students in history courses.