



Studying Abroad?

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WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE STUDY ABROAD SECTOR?

I have taught in the study abroad sector for over a decade, instructing American undergraduate students visiting London for a semester. One of the courses I teach, "British Life and Cultures," has the objective of increasing students' awareness and understanding about their host country's culture, thereby helping them pierce the American cultural bubble and start making critical comparisons and connections between different cultures.

As a half Italian and half British person myself, cultural comparison and immersion is central to my own learning experience. Physically stepping outside one's dominant culture we are confronted with different realities, creating balance and objectivity. In the words of the Scottish poet Robbie Burns in the final stanza of "To A Louse":
"O wad some Power the giftie gie us, to see oursels as ithers see us!" ("Oh would some Power the gift give us, to see ourselves as others see us!") Immersing ourselves in a new culture is, for me, the best way of gaining perspective on

where we have come from. Being removed from one's normal environment means we learn more about the external world around us, but also, equally importantly, it encourages us to turn an introspective gaze towards ourselves, leading to greater self-awareness. Distance provides objectivity. Or in the words of T.S. Eliot, it creates a cycle of reassessment where old assumptions are reconsidered:

*"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And to know the place for the first time."*

This is all very well and self-discovery is an accepted feature of travelling. But where does the study part fit in? A semester abroad programme can often be seen as a poor relation in terms of academic gravitas – the "easy" and "fun" interlude within the real academic grind of the home University. However nourishing being abroad is on

a personal level, it can often be perceived as detracting from the actual job of studying. Why would students spend their weekends immersed in research or essay writing when they can jump on a plane to Barcelona? (Even these days.) The American undergraduate students I teach undoubtedly manage to fit a lot into their experience socially and culturally. The question is, does time spent travelling around Europe detract from the studying part of study abroad? Universities and employers are seeking rounded individuals, so can we help students make use of their experiences outside of the classroom to promote fully integrated learning?

Yes and no. While travelling undoubtedly has a lot to offer in terms of self-discovery and learning how to navigate the world, it can be a distraction against deep learning in one specific field. We try to dissuade students from rushing about Europe too much, exhausting themselves with a check-list in hand rather than fully immersing themselves into the culture of their host nation. Experiential learning has become the buzzword in the sector but, like hopping from one plane to the next, the point is not to get the students out of the classroom just for the sake of it. The Association for Experiential Education defines it as:

"Experiential education is a philosophy in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values."

It is this sense, it is purposeful experiences, which are relevant to the course's learning outcomes, coupled with meaningful reflection, that make experiential learning powerful. As Biggs (2003) states: *"Learning is thus a way of interacting with the world...we see the world differently... education is about conceptual change, not just the acquisition of information."* The choice of experience therefore takes on real significance. Experiential learning can and should go beyond taking students to a "must-see" attraction led by a professional guide or drawing on their independent travel experiences, however interesting these may be. To engage students to deeper learning we need to go further; to introduce them to a local project and people, to an endeavor that requires creativity, dedication and innovation – modeling the very skills we want to equip our students with in the future. The most rewarding experiential visits are those that require students to step out of their comfort zone and put themselves in someone else's shoes. Initial resistance on the part of the student is often a sign that a shift, learning, is taking place. Asking the students for a written response is a way to incorporate and draw out creative and self-reflective writing that values the process as much as the outcome

– helping the student carve out time to fully reflect on the experience, while also providing the instructor with feedback in terms of the impact of the visit. Furthermore, deep experiential learning can enable the student to give something back to society – for example visiting a charity or community project can create a long lasting connection, leading the student to take ownership of the cause and even support it. This helps shape the learning and create a network between the student and the organization. It is using London, or whatever location the students are in, as the ultimate learning resource and as a springboard for creative thinking.

There are many positive aspects to studying and learning abroad, not least the space that being away from the norm provides to reassess ourselves and our relationship with learning, and explore the power of creative and self-reflective writing. The key is finding a balance between exploring the external landscape and concentration and focus on one's studies. I would argue that this is best achieved through direct engagement with appropriate experiential visits, coupled with discussion and free response writing. By explicitly recognizing the value of focused, challenging experience-based learning beyond the classroom, we can help engage students with the creative process of responding to this. The impact this can have on writing is extremely encouraging and equally liberating. Indeed, we can all benefit from stretching ourselves beyond our own safe cultural spaces to try and see, and present, the world anew. This is key for emerging writers who are about to write what they know but also what they know not. In the words of E.M Forster: *"How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"* Surely, this applies to an even greater extent to the power of writing and the conscious effort of expression, with all its risks. In polarized America (and increasingly the world) if students can return home with a greater sense of self-awareness and with the ability to place themselves into somebody else's shoes, then, in my opinion, this can be viewed as a worthwhile semester whatever education sector we are in. In the creative writing sector it's surely a pre-requisite requirement that is often too little explored.

References

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