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“My One Regret...”:

The Case for Cultural Immersion in Study Abroad Programs

Kevin Geyer

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ABSTRACT: Study abroad has been an established institution in US universities for almost a century, and hundreds of thousands of students travel to all corners of the world every year. While many list some degree of cultural immersion as a main goal, most students have a difficult time achieving this. Drawing from interviews with twenty-five UConn undergraduates that studied abroad, this study attempts to identify factors that hold students back from cultural encounters. Factors examined include: unrealistic prior expectations; program orientations that set students up as outsiders and facilitate bonding between Americans; new technology that allows easier communication with people back home; a great amount of traveling that dissociates visitors from locals; and confrontations with cultural differences. The study also discusses the ‘success stories’ of undergrads that made significant connections abroad, and highlights the factors that can lead to this (e.g., homestays, jobs, internships).

Study abroad is an established, popular institution in the United States. Every year, hundreds of thousands of students travel to all corners of the world to continue their schooling in a new setting. Recently, the expansion of study abroad programs has been promoted, and many schools want study abroad to be the norm for students, rather than the exception. Some colleges require their students to go abroad for some length of time. Furthermore, the Lincoln Commission is promoting a goal of sending one million students on study abroad trips every year by 2015 ('Global Competence and National Needs: One Million Americans Studying Abroad'). For many young people, study abroad is an opportunity to get a first glimpse of another part of the world, and it can be a critical experience for their development. If study abroad is to be such a mainstay in the lives of so many students, I think we need to reevaluate how many programs operate.

Some study abroad programs have structural flaws that must be addressed. In this research, I completed twenty-five interviews with University of Connecticut undergraduates who had recently returned from study abroad. From experiences in fourteen countries, through several different programs including AustraLearn, IFSA-Butler, CIEE, and UConn, similar patterns emerged. While students listed some degree of cultural immersion as one of their main goals, many found it very difficult to break out of a group of American friends that study abroad programs had clumped together. From orientation to their living arrangements, from traveling to their education, the Americans stuck together. Afterwards, they regretted this constriction, and when asked if they could have changed one thing about their time abroad, many expressed a desire to have 'branched out' more or to have made friends with local

students. In short, my research reveals that many students' intimate memories and moments abroad were shared with other Americans. This contrasts from the promises of cultural immersion that study abroad programs advertise. Promotion packages and websites contain exciting headlines such as 'See the world!' or 'Don't be a tourist! Do some real traveling. Help others and find yourself' ('Goabroad.com homepage'). However, each person's story is different, and several students that I interviewed had attained some degree of cultural immersion. Homestays, jobs, and internships were a few of the ways to escape the complete Americanization of study abroad. While study abroad programs cannot control students in all their decisions abroad, I believe they can *facilitate* and *educate* for a more valuable experience. This essay will show some of the pitfalls of many programs—and ways to avoid them.

Theory, Limitations of Methodology

The construction of the ethnographic text has long been a point of contention. While many anthropologists have attempted to be as objective and scientific as possible, literary processes, exclusions, and subjectivity are inherent parts of ethnography. Well-written ethnographies are accused of being part fictional and too literary, and some believe "metaphor, figuration, [and] narrative affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered" (Clifford 1986:4). In this argument, anthropology strays too far from science and enters the realm of art. Another common criticism of ethnography is that it is full of exclusions. An ethnography cannot possibly represent everyone's voice, and personal and historical circumstances will not always be present (Clifford 1986:7). Anthropologist Rayna Rapp admits that despite her thousands of days researching her topic of amniocentesis, there will always be "inevitable gaps in [her]

knowledge” (Rapp 1999:11). Also, ethnographies have necessary power relations. The discipline of anthropology was founded in the colonial area as the study of primitive societies, and today it remains entwined with an unjust power structure between the West and the rest of the world (Asad 1973:11). There is an authoritative voice of an outsider that attempts to speak for an unfamiliar society.

This study, which attempts to discover why so many study abroad students fail to attain the degree of cultural immersion that they desire, is not free from these issues. My research and the presentation of the data are filled with subjectivities and exclusions. I only interviewed twenty-five students, so I cannot offer sweeping generalizations about students nationwide. The data would be different if I had interviewed a different group of students. Furthermore, I am working from the assumption that most students generally want some sort of cultural contact. I realize some people have less desire to learn about local culture than others, and it would be unfair and presumptuous to label this as good or bad. (On the other hand, the trends of my participants support the assumption that study abroad participants want to engage with local culture.) Finally, although my study is concerned with bettering study abroad programs, I realize that many major decisions are up to the student. It’s true that even if a student was placed in a dorm with all Americans, knew nothing about the country beforehand, and was forced to take classes with all Americans, he or she could technically break out of the comfort zone and learn a lot. (However, I find this extremely unlikely. A study abroad program can facilitate integration with the host country, even if ultimately a lot of that power lies with the student.) Although these methods are limited to a degree, I believe reproducing students’ individualized accounts are the most accurate way of portraying study abroad experiences.

Moreover, these techniques are grounded in the methods of earlier anthropologists, specifically Lila Abu-Lughod and James Clifford.

With the use of so many personal stories, I find this paper somewhat equivalent to the work of Abu-Lughod in her book *Writing Women's Worlds*. Abu-Lughod portrays the lives of Bedouin women in Egypt by focusing on their stories, and by presenting many of them verbatim in her book. For her, stories show the politics of representation, and they are the best way of accurately describing people's lives (Abu-Lughod 1993). In addition, Abu-Lughod makes a strong argument of how generalizations clump individuals into constraining boxes, when there is really much more variation from person to person. Generalization can also introduce hierarchy and homogenize or flatten difference (Abu-Lughod 1993:7-9). Largely inspired by the theory of *Writing Women's Worlds*, this paper will focus on students' stories and the common issues that emerge. Like Abu-Lughod, I have used these stories to convincingly weave together accounts of students' trials abroad. Each argument I make will be fully supported by stories from several participants. Also, I will not relegate complicated experiences to small numbers and leave it at that. I will avoid generalizations and will be careful to fully elaborate with interview evidence. Finally, Abu-Lughod explicitly addresses that she made the stories flow in a smooth fashion, and retained the narrative form in her work as it is "the most familiar and satisfying of genres for readers" (Abu-Lughod 1993:31). As I am dealing with personal accounts under emotional circumstances, I would also like to keep the tone familiar and satisfying to read. I accept that the essay uses 'literary processes' that earlier anthropologists avoided.

Another source of inspiration comes from James Clifford, who analyzes the use of a polyphonic text. Instead of one authoritative voice, many voices are used (Clifford 1986:15-17).

Clifford believes that the “score of individuals occupying a spectrum of positions...” works to create “an unusual, multiply articulated record of... life at a crucial moment in its history” (Clifford 1986:16). I decided to use polyvocality throughout my text. Polyphonic texts can give a wide range of opinions and perspectives from all sorts of people in society. In this way, one might be able to avoid a narrow, authoritative, limited voice. My essay is littered with constant quotes from many participants. Their stories and perspectives are, in many ways, the basis of my argument, and it is only fair that they are reproduced to a large degree. With their generous help, they have become collaborators to the topic. If this study is to be of value, it must influence readers that students who participate in study abroad programs are struggling in common ways. I alone cannot make that decree; the argument becomes much more powerful when many voices are heard. Partial truths and incompleteness are present in any study, but the more people I talked to, the more gaps in knowledge were filled. Also, by letting my discussion and the voices of others be heard equally, I believe I am avoiding to some degree the ‘power inequality’ between researcher and informant.

In short, I accept that this study has subjectivities, partialities, and exclusions. However, study abroad experiences should be studied qualitatively, and participants’ stories are a major strength of the essay. In a related study, Wilkinson used similar techniques as she tracked the lives of four students studying abroad in France (Wilkinson 1995). Wilkinson also used subjective experiences of informants to demonstrate the flaws of study abroad programs. While some might argue this has an extremely limited focus and not much data can be gleaned from four accounts out of the several hundred thousand that participate in study abroad, I believe participants’ complete stories are more meaningful than ambiguous numbers and

vague percentages. The following essay will resemble the works of Abu-Lughod, Clifford, and Wilkinson.

A Lack of Cultural Immersion

My interviews reveal that students value and desire cultural experiences. One of the first questions I asked my participants was “What were your main goals before leaving? What did you want to get out of the experience?” A large majority, eighteen out of twenty-five, stated they wanted to learn about the local culture or assimilate into it. For students entering all different types of programs, going to different countries all over the world, this was an extremely common statement. Here are a few examples:

Jean (France): “To learn about the culture and get to know my host family and have good experiences over there.”

Paul (Australia): “I really wanted to immerse myself in another culture.”

Chris (Spain): “To meet new people, to better my Spanish, to learn about the culture.”

Lisa (Australia): “I wanted to feel like I was an Australian, and not just a person visiting. I really wanted to feel like I lived there.”

Sarah (South Africa): “To just learn about the culture, and to be in another place and to not be there as a tourist, just be there as living there.”

Ann Marie (France): “I wanted to be fluent when I came back... I wanted to make French friends, and I really wanted to get into the culture as much as possible. So basically: be French for a year.”

No other goal was listed nearly as many times. After cultural experiences, the next most common goals were to increase language skills (9 people), travel (6 people), meet new people (5), overcome personal challenges (4), complete academic goals (4), and gain a more informed worldview (3). Even the participants that did not explicitly mention culture did have goals that depended on achieving insight into the foreign society; for example, becoming fluent in the

local language. Or, students had broad aspirations like Jordan, who told me she vaguely wanted “to see what the rest of the world was like, and how different things worked.” It’s simple: students participate in study abroad because they want to come into contact with another culture, they want exchange with different people, and they want to gain a greater awareness of the world.

However, this main goal revolving around culture is not sufficiently fulfilled for many study abroad participants. I asked students if they felt they missed out on anything, or if they wished something was different about their time abroad. Not surprisingly, twelve students gave answers that reflected hardship in separating themselves from a tight-knit group of American friends and immersing themselves in the local culture. Six other students said they wished aspects of the program were different, including the orientation. Again, I’ll present a few examples from participants’ interviews that illustrate this best:

Laurie (France): “I hung out with Americans too much. I didn’t make any French friends, and that’s one thing I wanted. I wanted to learn more about their culture and their language. I didn’t really get that.”

Tim (Australia): “If I were to look at my beginning versus my end, things were a little different than what I would’ve expected... I guess you go in thinking you’re going to be best friends with all the Australians, but what you don’t realize is it depends on where they house you and how everything is set up.”

Mike (Germany): “While I was there I kind of, not resented, but it was definitely a bad thing that there were so many UConn kids there... There were a lot of occasions where I just fell back on the Americans in cases where I should have been meeting new people.”

Steve (England): “The one regret I have is that we weren’t really exposed to British students.”

Lynley (France): “I can definitely say I befriended no real French people while I was there... which kind of sucked.”

Whitney (Italy): “I wish that the people that ran the program could advise us better and introduce us to the culture.”

All these comments reflect a lack of immersion. At the same time, these students expressed how their closest friends were Americans, and most of their activities abroad were shared with Americans. In fact, all but two of my participants said their best friends were Americans. These two processes, a lack of immersion and the Americanization of study abroad, are inextricably linked. Because many study abroad programs facilitate students making strong friendships with Americans, relationships with local people and culture suffer. Boundaries are sometimes rigid between the visitors and the locals, and the whole experience is viewed through an Americanized lens. With this research, I want to pose the questions ‘What are we doing over there?’ ‘Why is this happening?’ and ‘What can we do to improve students’ time abroad?’ If universities want to set a goal of having the majority of their students study abroad, I think we first need to reevaluate the main objectives in sending young adults abroad. While study abroad is referred to as a time of learning and exchange, an opportunity for students’ awareness of the world to grow, and an exciting way to discover another location’s way of life, these goals are not being fully accomplished by a great deal of the participants that go abroad.

Wilkinson finds common patterns after following four Americans studying abroad in France. She notes that “much study abroad program recruitment literature depicts the overseas experience as a short cut to linguistic fluency and cross-cultural understanding,” but after viewing a trip abroad through the eyes of several students, “a different perspective emerges” (Wilkinson 1998:23). Her study depicts students wandering the streets but not speaking French or engaging in culture, and eventually returning home with many aspirations unfulfilled. The power of Wilkinson’s study lies in her detailed step-by-step analysis of four participants, something that I have done with a greater number of students in varied locations.

Furthermore, she views study abroad as a process, and not just a product of new skill sets that universities and the Lincoln Commission advocate. It is the flawed process, and not the inevitable new growth, that should be focused on and improved.

The point where this ‘clicked’ for me was during one of my first interviews. I was talking to Silvia, who studied in Florence through a UConn program. She described how she came to associate Florence with the friends (mostly fellow UConn students) she had there. When she went back to visit alone a couple months later,

“it just seemed so empty and unfriendly, because the people I had experienced it with weren’t there. I’ve been there with my family and I’ve been there with friends and I could never go back alone. I associate it with people too much. You kind of associate people with the place and the place with the people you’re with.”

I believe Silvia touched upon a very ironic point that most study abroad students share. Reflecting on my own time abroad, her message is certainly true—I cannot dissociate many of my adventures in New Zealand without thinking fondly of the friends I was with. But if this association is true, I have to ask myself what we are learning from the study abroad experience. If we live in a foreign place for half a year, but at the end of it only come to associate it with American friends who more or less share our customs and beliefs, are we really expanding ourselves? Can we even get more than a skewed glimpse at another corner of the world, or are the lenses too clouded with our American ideals? Furthermore, in a later interview, Whitney communicated to me just how thoroughly the American college student values penetrated study abroad trips. She visited a friend in Florence, and described how the American roommates “were hammered at 6 o’clock and they were all going out to drink.” What is the main purpose of us going abroad?

Based on the fact that over half of my interviewees expressed their struggles related to culture (as well as informal conversations with many other people that studied abroad prior to my academic involvement in the topic), I can safely conclude that there are factors holding students back from valuable cultural experiences. Moreover, study abroad programs should treat these issues as preventable, and work towards solving them. Therefore, I will describe eight of the reasons that contribute to students mostly bonding with Americans and not having cultural encounters. In addition, the essay will be divided into sections based on larger anthropological themes that the stories speak to. Extracts from the interviews I conducted with UConn students, as well as excerpts from my own study abroad experience in New Zealand, will serve as evidence and illuminate my points. No student came across all these scenarios, but each scenario was discussed in several interviews. Programs and universities should identify and evaluate factors like this before greatly increasing their output of traveling students.

ALIENATION, ADAPTATION

Unrealistic Prior Knowledge

Two questions I asked my participants were ‘Why did you choose that country to study abroad in?’ and ‘Did you have a lot of prior knowledge about that country before you left?’ I wanted to elicit how prepared students were before living in a foreign country, and what they knew about their future surroundings beforehand. While culture shock is unavoidable, I assume some prior

knowledge could help during a difficult transition phase. And, perhaps by expecting a few things, students could start adapting quicker.

However, with the exception of four students, everyone stated that they knew little to nothing about the country upon arriving, or that they thought they did and it turned out to be much different. I heard many responses like Laura's ("Oh, no, not at all. I went into it pretty blind") or Jean's ("No, I really didn't. And it was actually much different than I expected it to be"). Lauren randomly chose to go to Russia, with no prior knowledge of the place at all: "I just wanted to go somewhere really different that nobody goes to... I didn't speak the language when I went. All I had was a little tour guide book of St. Petersburg. I read that on the plane." Erin bluntly answered "I had no knowledge whatsoever." It was shocking how similar my participants' statements were. The vast majority chose to visit a country they had little knowledge of.

Even the four students who did say they had some prior knowledge admitted it wasn't much. Mike told me, "I mean, [I knew] more than your average American, but not a ton. I had taken German for two years here and I had taken one 200-level German culture class, but I wasn't an expert on Germany." Lynley explained, "I've been speaking French since I was ten, so I learned a lot about the culture and the city in general, but not as much as I would've liked." Colleen "definitely did a little bit of research on it, just seeing all the different things you could do there... It sounded like it would be amazing." Possibly the most prepared was Whitney, who had been to Italy before, was advanced in the language, and had taken modern history classes and a film class.

Interestingly, when asked why they chose to study in the country they did, there were generally four different responses among the students. The majority of their responses had to do with language; students learning a foreign language want to put their skills to the test in corresponding countries, and English-speaking students sometimes only feel comfortable going to a country that also speaks English. Mike illustrated the choice based on language: “There are programs that do a foreign language and a foreign study in engineering... I started with the German Studies degree so [Germany] was basically my only choice.” Other students were attracted by aspects of the program they were seeking, such as Maria, who was interested in Armenia because it was the only abroad archaeology field school offered by UConn professors. A third group of students chose their decisions on a whim, such as Erin, who walked into the study abroad office with her roommate: “It was kind of spur-of-the-moment... Greece seemed exotic. We were just like ‘Alright! Let’s do it.’” Finally, several participants expressed long-held desires to visit the countries of their choice. Paul told me how “I’ve always had this thing; as a kid I always wanted to go to Australia and see the Great Barrier Reef.” Although the reasons for choice vary, each one is based on little prior knowledge. In some cases, there was little thoughtful consideration, or the location was decided by others. While students are theoretically offered a choice of hundreds of different programs, the real number of choices is much slimmer for individual students.

For the majority of students that chose their country because of the language they were studying, many found that knowing the language does not necessarily mean that one knows much about the culture. Gina, a Spanish minor who studied in Spain, responded to my question by saying “I thought that I [had some prior knowledge]. But a lot of my earlier Spanish classes

concentrated on the culture of Latin America and the areas that were closer to home. I didn't have as much knowledge of Spain." Similarly, Ann Marie, a French major who studied in France, stated "The knowledge I had was mostly based on language... I didn't really know that much about the culture... I thought I did, but I didn't." Many of the other foreign language students also admitted that they knew less about the culture than they would have liked to. Therefore, even in programs where students had been learning about the language for years, the new culture they were surrounded by was shocking and disorienting.

Many students begin their study abroad experience with a romanticized version of the country they are about to enter. Nations promote a fictionalized version of themselves in an effort to lure tourists. This act is called 'nation branding,' and it has become a powerful tool for governments in recent years. Nations have been hiring public relation firms to determine better ways of advertising their countries (Teslik 2007). This is not surprising, as countries no longer determine their strength by military numbers, but rather by monetary numbers (Vaknin). Naturally, only positive and iconic aspects are displayed, which leads to both nationals and internationals of a country being influenced by these false ideals. This relates to the group of students who have always possessed a romanticized version of their desired country.

An example of nation branding involves New Zealand, which has been aggressively promoting its own unique 'brand' for a greater place on the world stage. The government has been endorsing a campaign called '100% PURE' for a decade. Elements of the campaign include pictures of empty landscapes, adventure, friendly people, and pristine nature (Durr 2007:57). The main tourism website of New Zealand (www.newzealand.com/travel/international) describes how it is the youngest country on Earth. The beautiful countryside is heavily

featured, and Auckland is the only city that makes a small appearance. However, these advertisements of New Zealand are very misleading. Environmental degradation has been occurring since European arrival; rich lowland ecosystems were transformed and only fragments of the old ecosystem survive today (Clark 2004:8). Ninety percent of New Zealanders live in cities, a fact left out of the advertisements that praise how connected with nature the locals are. And in terms of sustainability, pollution, and environmental awareness, New Zealand is actually not doing exceptionally well. Drinking water quality, solid waste management, soil conservation, and recycling are also fairly poor (Durr 2007:63). Yet the '100% PURE' campaign reaches interested tourists who believe New Zealand is an idyllic paradise. Even New Zealanders are fooled by the myth that their countryside is more 'pure' than it really is. Bell, a prominent New Zealand sociologist, believes that New Zealanders are 'casually satisfied' with the green-wash image and under-resource the actual environment (Bell 2005:8). Nation branding promotes positive images of a country that become romanticized, fictional versions of the place in people's minds.

When students arrive at their new destination, it makes sense that there would be statements like "it was different than I expected it to be." The conflicting knowledge between advertisements and reality can only make it more difficult for students to learn about a nation's true culture. Allison made this illuminating point to me: "The funny thing was that I thought I had a lot of prior knowledge about England, mainly because I really like British history. What I didn't realize was that this wasn't Britain of the Victorian Age or the medieval period. I didn't know anything about current Britain. I was kind of shocked by how much I didn't know." Study abroad students enter their new country as outsiders, misled from all the positive images the

country has been boasting in order to lure in tourists. Nation branding, and students' exaggerated views of a foreign country that result from nation branding, adds to culture shock and increases students' feelings of isolation.

From the responses of my participants for these two questions, an interesting picture emerges. It depicts students entering their new countries relatively ignorant of what their surroundings will actually be like. They had few options to choose from, as aspects of the program or their own language dictated where they should go. Furthermore, those who decided where to go spontaneously and those who knew their destination for many years were attracted by the positive images promoted from nation branding. The unrealistic prior knowledge that students have increases their culture shock, and makes their transition period more difficult. This snowballs into a larger issue, as the all-critical orientation occurs during the culture shock period. This significant time, the initial first days in-country, will be discussed next.

Transition

The transition into a new country, which includes the time period when orientation takes place, is usually one of confusion, discomfort, and mild fear. Many students go through some form of culture shock when they arrive in the new country, and they are in the midst of a strange transition when orientation begins. The basics of culture shock must be in every handbook of every study abroad program, although no description can really prepare students for it. The Center for Global Education's handbook summarizes:

“When going abroad, students will experience differences in manners, beliefs, customs, laws, language, art, religion, values, concept of self, family organization, social organization, government, behavior, etc... The new cultural elements a student encounters abroad may be so different that they seem ‘shocking’ in comparison to cultural norms they are used to back home” (‘Adjustments and Culture Shock’).

Another handbook details the ‘roller-coaster of emotions’ that many students face abroad: “The process is never easy and can include mood swings alternating between heady exhilaration and mild depression” (‘Health and Adjustments’). Furthermore, a 1995 study listed extreme symptoms of students recently arrived at a new country, including “disorientation, nostalgic-depressive reaction, and feelings of isolation, alienation, powerlessness, hypochondriasis, paranoia, and hostility” (Hamboyan 1995:2). In other words, it is very common for travelers to have conflicting feelings of adjustment and alienation, sometimes within brief periods of time, and sometimes very dangerous. It varies from student to student, yet it is almost always present.

I questioned some of my participants on their transitions, specifically their first weeks in their new location. Not one told me of a smooth transition; not one tried to make it seem like they comfortably fit right in. In fact, many (including me) had moments of isolation, anxiousness, and longing. Below are a few that capture the feeling.

Ann Marie described the beginning of her year abroad in Paris:

“I remember the first few weeks of teaching. I’m not a teacher, I don’t know how to teach. And the way the program works is they basically just throw you in front of a class of 35 kids and say ‘teach.’ I had no idea what level of language they were at, I don’t know what they’ve learned, I don’t know anything about these kids, do I have to follow a certain curriculum? It was pretty much like a blank slate, like first day, go.”

Ashley talked about the frustration with entering Mexico:

“I was really concerned about my Spanish in the beginning... I couldn’t really express myself well, and I would have to ask ‘what did you say?’ a million times. I just hated that, and seeing people getting frustrated with me after a little bit.”

Laura studied in England, and was the only member of a very small program. She arrived alone, with no orientation or possibilities of meeting anyone:

“It was very intimidating. When I first got there, I had forgotten to email someone to meet me at the airport, so I had to go from the airport to my dorm by myself. I couldn’t find it, I got off the subway at the wrong stop... I thought I could find a cab to bring me there but I couldn’t find any cabs. I was in the ghetto area... I was really scared. I had all my bags piled on top of me... I had to figure everything out myself. The first two weeks I was there, it was very difficult. I didn’t know *anyone*. I didn’t know where to get food, because [it was my first time] in a city.”

This is an excerpt from an email I sent home during my first week in Auckland. It certainly illustrates the confusion of the transition:

“... There are so many things we have to do here now, and everything’s a hassle. Today we had to figure out our cell phone situation for hours. We had to find cheap phones, get a good plan, and set it all up... Then we went grocery shopping, and it took hours. We had to walk at least half an hour to the place, and all the foods are different brands and in random places and different measurements, then we tried to get back on the buses but it took forever. Our bags were ripping as we were walking all over the city. I’ve already had to spend hundreds of dollars, I’m stressed. And there are converters and adaptors to get for all electronic things. Tomorrow I have to get an ID from the university, my information doesn’t work or something so I didn’t get one, then set up my email and Internet. I have to pay if I want Internet in the room, and even if I pay, I can only get 10 megabytes a second, which probably isn’t fast enough for video, so I can’t skype. I could use the university computers, but they’re slow too and I’d need to pay for an upgrade for those. We should be able to skype though, if I go to an Internet café, but I’ll need to buy a headset. So.... Everything is confusing and overwhelming. Sometimes we all feel so frustrated, and I know it’s just because the homesickness makes everything worse. Sometimes we’ll get outside and be going somewhere and I feel so free and happy and excited, and then I’ll feel overwhelmed and get this huge longing for home and school.”

Chris described his first days in Spain:

“I was alone. I went to Barcelona first to visit my friend, and Barcelona was just... it’s like New York on steroids. There are so many different cultures in one little city. There are so many people you lose your identity almost. When you’re walking around, you see characters performing in the street, families, people trying to sell you things, little kiosks... and you just don’t know where you fit in... I kind of felt bad the first day I moved in to the homestay. It was my mom’s birthday, and so I could only think about how she was missing me, and how on her birthday she only wanted to see her youngest son. That was hard for me.”

Chris pinpointed the feeling that so many students go through when they come to a new, confusing place: a loss of identity. Students are in a liminal phase. They have left behind their old lives, their old identities. They’re in a foreign landscape with new customs, new beliefs. Students can try to refit their old identities to a new culture, or they could forge new ones. When many students are in this liminal phase, they will reach out for something familiar and comforting, most often in the form of other American students. I’ll return to this point shortly in regards to orientation, a critical event of the study abroad process that occurs during this perplexing transition.

Orientation

The most popular study abroad programs, including AustraLearn, CIEE, and IFSA-Butler, have an orientation for newly-arrived students. The orientations usually occur in only a few days and attempt common goals: to provide an overview of the local culture, to prepare students for the different school system, to teach safety precautions, and to give an introduction to fun activities in the surrounding areas. After listening to other student’s experiences, I believe orientation to be the most critical point in a student’s whole period of study abroad. We have

already seen that students enter their new country without much knowledge. Orientation takes this blank slate and shapes many of the student's perceptions and attitudes towards the nation and its people, defines the role the student will accept, and creates important connections between other students. Dragonas writes that "the importance of orientation, or preparation, for an exchange program cannot be overemphasized... [it] is essential to the development of an awareness of cultural differences and facilitates adaptation to a new environment" (Dragonas 1993:470). However, I will argue that many orientations *set students up as outsiders* and play a large role in *determining who the students become friends with*.

As we have seen, students have little to no knowledge of the country before they arrive, and they are certainly not accustomed to the cultural intricacies they are likely to encounter. Yet instead of preparing students for cultural immersion, many students articulated that orientation does the exact opposite. Instead of dismissing the stereotypes that nation branding and romanticized ideals offer, orientation perpetuates those stereotypes. The activities and the sightseeing relegate the student to the role of a tourist. And in the process, surrounded by strange and unfamiliar things, students quickly bond with their fellow travelers.

I asked participants to describe their orientations, and many noted 'stereotypical' or 'touristy' activities.

Lisa (Australia): "We were on the Great Barrier Reef, scuba diving with all these amazing animals, Cannes was really fun, it was so beautiful there. It was a great time, it was so much fun... We just got situated to the country, got our phones, all the basic information. We talked about what's okay to do here, what to expect from people, the little things you need to pick up on before you're in the country... So we had those orientations where we had to sit and listen, but for the most part we were walking around Cannes. We went to 'Rainforestation,' and we hung out with Aborigines, we threw boomerangs and tried to play the didgeridoo, we held

koalas and petted kangaroos... all stereotypical, but it was really cool that everything I wanted to do, which was hold a koala and see a kangaroo, that all happened within the first two days of being in Australia.”

Steve (England): “We went on tours of the city, they showed us the housing, the academic building, the areas around where we studied, and then we had some tours of the city... We did a double-decker tour of the city: we went to Big Ben, Westminster Abbey, Chicago Square, Buckingham Palace, Hyde Park, all the tourist places.”

Tim (Australia): “It was a lot less about formal information, there were a few orientation sessions but they were only about a half hour to an hour long. There was one session on Australian schools, how they run a little differently and how the grading is different. Another session was on culture shock. The third session was just on Australian laws and customs, basically, making sure you didn’t do anything that was illegal in the country... that was basically it.” [Tim goes on to describe the same activities as Lisa.]

Sarah (South Africa): “We did a lot of the touristy kind of things. We went to Robison Island and saw where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned, we went on a wine tour, we went out to dinner and bunch, we went to the American Consulate, and we got a safety briefing... And yeah, just some touristy stuff.”

Paul (Australia): “Orientation was a very interesting time, because we stayed in Cannes, which is sort of like the Cancun of Australia. It’s one of the northernmost cities and one of the most developed in that area. It was pretty much like a party for the three days we were there. We stayed in a resort hostel that’s only known for partying... We had our orientation classes, we went to the rainforest and saw kangaroos and koalas and Aboriginal dances. Another excursion was we went to the Great Barrier Reef and got to snorkel and dive. Cannes was probably a great place to do the orientation. The Australians really like to relax and drink a lot. I didn’t expect any of this because I thought that orientation was going to be about tutorials and workshops for hours, and it really wasn’t.”

Eric (New Zealand): “The orientation didn’t prepare me as well as I thought it would. I mean, it was nice because we got to meet each other and stuff, but at the same time, I was paying to live and study in Auckland and not go to the ‘summer camp’ feel that the orientation had to it, with the planned activities and the high level of organization.”

These statements were not ubiquitous; eleven of the seventeen participants who had an orientation related stories like these. However, it points out that there are a significant number of orientation programs that perpetuate the stereotypes and misconceptions instead of preparing students for cultural immersion. These orientations, which Eric describes as having a ‘summer camp feel’, are not as helpful as they could be. They are centered around fun activities, not learning and preparation. They take place in party locations like Cannes, instead of the site where the students will actually be studying. In my case, after several action-packed days in Rotorua where we went caving, attended a sheep show, tried ‘Zorbing’ (a highly-publicized adventure where one rolls down a hill inside a giant ball), learned the Haka, and visited a Maori village, the tour bus simply dropped us off at our new apartments in Auckland and left. Orientation was undoubtedly fun, but it did not fully prepare us for our education at the university or life in Auckland.

Ideas of identity are interesting at orientation. It’s fascinating to see how study abroad programs contrast visitors with locals. The Americans are set up as sight-seers of an ‘other.’ The study abroad programs of Australia and New Zealand seem to have painted the indigenous groups as commodities to be observed, their villages an attraction. Students may be encouraged to explore and mingle, but by coming back to their American home base, the boundaries between the two groups are kept intact. In the process of all this, the students’ own ideas of identity are re-imagined as well. They are strangers bound together in the face of an unfamiliar society, but the students quickly find a new sense of being ‘American.’ In contrast to how exotic the people of the foreign country are (or at least how exotic the orientation portrays them up to be), Americans are familiar and comforting. At home students would be

several thousand miles apart, but within the context of their program, they are instant friends after a few days.

This is the second problem I see with some orientation programs: they have a heavy hand in determining your friends. When one is confronted by a whole new environment and foreign customs, most will immediately latch on to the familiar, which in this case are other American students. In an article about 'Backpacker Culture,' Anderskov relates how easy it is for travelers to converse with each other, compare travel experiences, and discuss future plans, because of the common ground between them (Anderskov 2002). In the first weeks of studying abroad, this idea certainly holds as visiting Americans have common travel goals and will likely bond over their similar backgrounds. In addition, some orientation programs include adventurous activities that will inevitably draw young people closer together. During my orientation, we spent three hours crawling, swimming, and squeezing through an underground cave together. There were heart-pounding moments, and some areas where we had to tightly link arms to safely pass through rapids. In short, it was a bonding experience that none of us will likely forget. I presume similar feelings would emerge from an excursion to a Mayan ruin, a bus tour of Greece, or a week-long journey through the Tunisian desert. Excursions like these bring American students closer together.

Orientation creates a support structure for students that will last the remainder of their time abroad. Tim pointed this out for me: "The friends you make there are really like your only connection to home once you get to your host university." When I questioned participants about their closest friends, many mentioned that they had met in the very beginning of their trips.

Paul (Australia): “The first guy I made friends with, his name was Brendan. He was checking into the hostel room with me, and I was like ‘Hey, how’s it going, you have a very interesting accent, where are you from?’ He’s like ‘I’m from Ireland,’ ... It’s funny, I was wearing my Irish track jacket. I asked what type of music he likes and he said ‘Ministry of Sound.’ That’s all I listen to, so we were best friends from day one. And anywhere I went he was always with me, throughout the entire time.”

Mike (Germany): “Two of [my friends] were UConn students because we had met up in Heidelberg. All three of us ended up going to Stuttgart [the host university] as well. And so because we were together during the very first month when we knew nothing and knew no one, we kind of bonded then.”

Allison (England): “The first [trip I went on] was to the closest city, Coventry. We did a little guided tour. And I remember me and Lana, my friend from UConn, were sitting there and we heard English, American accents, behind us, so we turned around and said hello! We were just so excited to see them... During that first meeting, we were already planning our trips... I mostly traveled with them.”

Similarly, I met my closest friend of the study abroad experience moments after I stepped off the plane in New Zealand. The two of us were attempting to find the correct bus that would take us to the orientation location. We sat together during the 3-hour bus ride, and talked about our hopes for New Zealand, places and adventures we wanted to see and do. It felt natural to spend most of the three-day orientation together. The bond was sealed when we got to our apartment building in Auckland and found out we were living together. Many of my respondents quickly fell into friendships with people they had never met before.

By no means am I suggesting that orientation be discarded. The seven students I talked to that had a very brief orientation, or no orientation at all, had difficulties without the introduction to the country or the support system. Jean described how she arrived at her host family’s house at 5 o’clock the night before classes started. Her host mother walked them over to the school that night, but “the next morning we had to find the school on our own. It was

overwhelming at first.” Similarly, Allison arrived “a day or two before classes started. We hadn’t picked any classes, because you had to do that once you got there. So it took me about a week to get my classes... I was pretty stressed about it.” Laura, who was the only person in her particular program, discovered upon arrival that she would not have an orientation because her fees didn’t cover it. With that initial experience gone, Laura “had a hard time meeting people in that sense. They didn’t introduce me to anyone... I was in a totally different situation from the rest of the people.” The hardships of these students underscore the how advantageous an orientation can be.

The goals of orientation programs should be reevaluated. Instead of celebrating the most adventurous activities a location can offer, orientation should be an opportunity to acclimate students to a new society and prepare them for a new culture. Indeed, the students that did attain some degree of cultural immersion mentioned how minimalist their orientation was. Perhaps ‘less is more’ should be adopted by those giving orientations. Furthermore, foreign peoples should not be exoticized or essentialized. Some orientations create boundaries between the visitors and the locals, keeping them separate. When students return home and lament how they were not exposed to local people or did not gain insight into a culture beyond their American friends, it reflects these boundaries. Finally, support structures of American friends are extremely helpful, but students do not have to be dependent upon them. I will illustrate in the next section how, in many cases, study abroad programs lead many students become further dependent on these support structures.

COMMUNITY

Living Arrangements

Many participants' dependency on their American support structure strengthens when they reach their new home. Students may find their roommates to be Americans as well, which limits the likelihood that they will extend themselves to local students. It also reinforces their identity as Americans. The American apartments or houses are portrayed to be their niche community, a small island of comfort in a sea of unfamiliarity.

Out of twenty-six students, sixteen of them, ranging from different programs all over the world, were placed with other American students. Generally, people were not wildly enthusiastic about their Americanized living arrangements, as the testimonies below illustrate.

Laurie (France): "We lived in an American dorm... Even if it had cost a thousand dollars more, I probably still would have opted to live with a family. I wanted that extra cultural experience."

Paul (Australia): "We all lived together in this one long block of Little America... I knew I wanted to talk to Australians as much as I could. I was put in these houses that were mostly all American and I was like 'I kind of don't really want to know you guys that well because I just came from America', and I put myself out there to really hang out with a lot of Aussies."

Ann Marie (France): "All the UConn kids were together... in the American residence, which was part of a larger complex of several different houses for international kids... I really wanted to concentrate on the language, the culture, and learning as much as possible... I wasn't immersed in French, because I lived with American students."

Jordan (South Africa): "UConn rented us (15 people) a huge house... Our house basically was our island of America in Africa."

Steve (England): “Yup, we were in an apartment complex in central London where there were other American students, but we lived with all UConn kids. There were 23 of us... My one regret is that we weren’t really exposed to British students.”

Lynley (France): “We lived with other Americans in the ‘American House’. I think for my language it would have been better to live in a home... We were always speaking English at home, which didn’t help our speaking abilities outside of the home.”

Lisa (Australia): “I ended up just living with four American girls... I didn’t want to feel sheltered. I wanted to step out of my comfort zone and live with someone from a different country. I was eager to do that... I just feel that it was really Americanized and I much rather been living with Australians.”

In these cases and others, participants felt limited and constrained. Living day-to-day with other Americans can do much to dispel the new environment most study abroad programs promise. Instead of being surrounded and immersed in a new culture, students return to their American friends day after day. In the case of foreign language students, we see that this hinders their ability to learn the language. Furthermore, most non-foreign language students expressed a desire to be immersed in a different culture.

In contrast, I heard radically different stories from participants who lived with local families in homestays or with local students in apartments. *There is a very high correlation between the students that lived with locals and those that achieved their goals and had valuable cultural experiences.* In other words, ten of the students I interviewed lived with locals, and nine of these had strong cultural experiences. On the other hand, the other sixteen students I interviewed did not live with locals, and only two of these emphasized their encounters with local culture. Hopefully these numbers give insight into how important the use of living arrangements is.

The testimonies of my participants demonstrate the positive influences a homestay can have on a student studying abroad. While it is obvious that homestays are not for everyone, students should be given a choice of their living arrangements. Previously we saw how those that lived with Americans felt they missed out and wished they were given a choice, and here we will see how those that did live with locals cherished the valuable experiences:

Gina (Spain): “I know people that went with other programs to Spain, and lived with people from their own university. And I feel like I just got that much better at the language, that much more immersed... I loved the homestay, I loved the school that we were in... I was really happy with the experience.”

Caitlin (Scotland): “I lived with four Scottish girls, and I think it was a lot better to do that... having them around, they taught me some things so that I could fit in a little bit more... That’s one of the best parts. A lot of people are jealous that I still talk to people from Scotland.”

Chris (Spain): “Homestays have their own tradition, their own family setting, their own way of doing things. They’re native, they know the city, they know where you live, they know how to help you... I was part of their family. Their grandchildren, I would help them with their English homework. We would talk about pretty much everything, daily events, what you would normally do with your parents, your brother, your sister. Some people did live in the dorms—I had the option—but it wouldn’t have been as purposeful.”

Jean (France): “Definitely one of the best parts was living with the family and just meeting them and talking with them. It was just so cool to be able to do that... It’s a shame they don’t do it [with semester-long programs] because it’s so important. You get a lot out of that.”

Lauren (Russia): My host mom and I grew very fond of each other. We would sit down at night and have tea together, I would practice my Russian and she would speak horrible English to me... I think it’s a very vital part of getting to know the culture.”

In short, learning and exchange take place. Boundaries break down. Visitors gain insight into the locals’ way of life, and the locals learn a bit about Americans. Instead of getting

the occasional glimpse of a foreign society through an Americanized lens, two cultures converse with one another and help each other grow. Lauren, Jean, Caitlin, and Chris emphasize learning things from one another and exchanging knowledge. Listening to these stories was truly inspirational. They prove how much young adults can learn on their own after a few months away, and they show what study abroad can accomplish. Dragonas also champions the use of homestays, claiming that students attain a sense of belonging, they acclimate better to their new environment, and they “help one go beyond superficial impressions of the target culture” (Dragonas 1993:472). If the goal of having one million college students studying abroad each year becomes a reality, I hope programs that offer homestays as a choice are the norm instead of the exception.

Homestays do not have to be terrifying. Ashley, who lived with a family in Mexico, elucidated how the other Americans who were in her program stayed with families who resided nearby:

“None of us lived together. But a few of us lived in the same area and we could potentially walk to each other’s houses. But I found I didn’t do that too much... I am glad I stayed in a homestay instead of with other Americans. My Spanish got so much better... you’re completely immersed, and I thought it was a good balance. You’re immersed but you’re not totally isolated because you do have American friends who are there for you.”

This *immersion without isolation* that Ashley points out is particularly satisfying. It demonstrates the existence of strong support structures that, if needed in trying times, are present. Americans are just slightly removed from one another so that they don’t fall back on each other for everything and become best friends. Instead, relationships with the host family are emphasized. This same formula could work with students living in apartments. Caitlin,

Laura, and Jenny all had local flat-mates that they became good friends with, but Americans were close by in other apartments if some familiarity was needed. Support structures should be a vital part of any study abroad program, and they can certainly remain present with homestays.

There are cultural differences between the environments of homestays and American-dominated dorms. Chris described how he was basically adopted by the family, and had to adapt to their own ways of functioning. Students that live with locals have to integrate into and learn a different way of life. On the other hand, Americans thrown together in a dorm can simply recreate the college culture of their home university. Whitney's observation of the UConn in Florence program, where her friends' roommates were "hammered at 6 o'clock and they were all going out to drink" shows a possible result of study abroad programs that clump young Americans together. It begs the question, do universities really want to be sending a million college students over to other countries just to party? Or do they want them to gain an understanding of the world while promoting a positive, respectful, interested image of the United States? Homestays are one of the key ways of achieving this.

Traveling

Traveling, while a main focus of the study abroad experience, usually sets students apart from the locals and the culture. When American students arrive in a foreign country and aim to travel as much as possible, a major divide becomes apparent between them and the resident students. Understandably, local students have already seen most of their home country or have no wish to do so immediately. Neither do they want to frantically travel to other

countries every weekend during the school year. When I asked my New Zealand-born acquaintance if he wanted to travel with us that weekend to the lakeside town of Taupo, he smiled and answered that was his hometown, and he didn't have any desire to go home that weekend. With so many weekends (or weeks) out traveling, American students miss the chance to foster bonds with local students.

The vast majority of participants noted that they traveled with only American friends, and a few said they traveled with American and International friends. Steve, who visited a total of eight countries during his semester, told me that he traveled with all UConn students, sometimes up to thirteen at once. Mike pointed out that no German friends wanted to go traveling with his group of friends. "I went with mostly other international students because the Germans were always like 'why would you want to go there?' It's the same with them here. They're all like 'let's go to Boston' and I'm like 'who cares?' So [traveling] was almost always with international students."

Tim (Australia): "Australians tended not to go with us... they're there for school while we're there to see Australia. A lot of them also made a joke that Americans saw more in 5 months than they'd seen in 20 years."

Allison (England): "[I] did sightseeing with Americans. British kids don't want to go anywhere hardly. They're like 'we see that castle everyday.'"

Colleen (New Zealand): "Kiwis, they didn't seem as enthusiastic about it, they're like 'oh yeah, whatever,' it's not new to them. But to us it's like 'oh my God, this is amazing, I want to go there.' So yeah it was mostly Americans."

These stories point out several of the reasons why a rift grows between the locals and the visitors. Local students might have no desire to see places they've grown up around, especially during the school year. While Americans often speed through their schoolwork in an

effort to travel on the weekends, the locals might be focused more on the schoolwork. Anderskov's article about backpacker culture, mentioned earlier, certainly applies here as well. Those that travel together or who have similar experiences are likely to quickly bond over their common ground (Anderskov 2002). During these excursions, participants forge bonds with the people they travel with, knowing they have shared something extraordinary together. Therefore, traveling brings American students closer together, and it dissociates travelers from resident students.

Interestingly, those that did not travel much were the ones who became much more involved with the local people in their area. This makes sense, as they had more time at home to foster bonds and have steady friendships. For example, both Ann Marie and Mike were working hard with their jobs, and although they did not see all the places they wanted to, they had fulfilling, valuable experiences working within the French and German governments, respectively. Similarly, Ashley told me that she couldn't travel as much as she had wanted to. However, she was my only participant to have had a romantic relationship abroad. "I learned a lot from my boyfriend actually. I think that's an experience that no one else really got." Her relationship even led her to return to Mexico: "I went back there during the summer to visit my boyfriend and to travel, which I didn't get to do, and I stayed with my host mom for a week." In Ashley's case, the lack of travel led to a fulfilling relationship and the potential for many return trips to Mexico.

I do not think traveling should be discouraged; traveling leads to life-long memories and eye-opening wonders. Rather, I believe study abroad programs should emphasize a balance. One might spend so much time away from their host location that they miss out on seeing the

original country they desired to study in. Indeed, Erin visited at least five other countries in Europe, but afterwards stated “I wish I could have spent more time focusing on doing more trips around Greece. We didn’t really do a lot of that.” The traveling mentality that study abroad programs promote leads to students being away from the landscapes and cultures of their host country.

Education

Another topic I questioned students about involved schoolwork, and if it got in the way of other things they would like to do. Contrary to my expectations, several laughed when I asked the question if their schoolwork was demanding, and then responded that it was extremely simple and was not one of their priorities. In most of these situations, students were taking classes with the other members of the study abroad trip (usually from the same university), representing a further instance of students not being able to attempt cultural immersion. Here, class time becomes another example of students being confined to other Americans, whether they like it or not.

In total, thirteen of the students I interviewed stressed that their classes were very easy. Here are a few of the responses I heard immediately to asking the question “Was the schoolwork demanding?”

Lynley (France): “It was the least amount of work I’ve ever done in my entire life.”

Steve (England): “Not at all... I only took three classes, two of them were gen eds [general education classes].”

Erin (Greece): “No, not in the least. My economics teacher... we only had class maybe five times the whole time I was there. He was always just talking about going to the Greek clubs, always off-topic.”

Laurie (France): “Not really. I studied really, really hard at first, and then one of the year-long students talked to us and said ‘oh if you get a twelve out of twenty, it’s an A.’ I was just like ‘Oh I don’t need to study anymore.’ I stopped studying halfway through the course. I still got A’s.”

Jen (England): “I took two classes that were identical and pointless because they taught the same thing.”

Furthermore, many of the students I talked to expressed the firm belief that, compared to the experiences of living abroad, schoolwork was not as important. It is possible that the orientations that put students in the tourist mindset are also having an effect here. After all, many of the orientations in New Zealand and Australia were taking place hundreds of miles away from the actual school site, and mostly focused on fun, sight-seeing activities. As a result of not being concerned, many participants fell behind in their studies. Sarah, who studied in South Africa, told me that “a lot of us ended up procrastinating, and by the end we felt like we had way too much work to do and we weren’t getting a chance to go out and do things.” Caitlin confessed that “I think that what I wanted to do ultimately got in the way of my schoolwork. One of my classes had mandatory attendance, which I’ve never heard of. That really hurt my grade, because I had planned a trip to Spain during one of my classes. But you have to find a balance.” Chris illustrated the same point:

“Homework honestly came last. You learn more in the streets and no one can tell you otherwise. They would always tell us ‘Do your schoolwork, because these grades are going back to your university.’ At the same time, they’d tell us ‘Don’t be afraid to go out at 11 o’clock on a school night to hang out with Spaniards, because you’re going to learn more from there. That’s why you’re here, to learn about them.’ And I did. A lot of my friends from Spain introduced me to new things...”

In other words, even though the primary purpose of a study abroad trip is to study, and participants are spending thousands of dollars to attend a foreign university, many are not expecting to study hard. If they are introduced from the beginning to a group of American friends and put in the role of a tourist since orientation, they are expecting fun and travel more than learning and integration. The mindset promoted in orientation comes back to haunt students with regards to schoolwork.

On the other hand, four of my participants struggled with very difficult schoolwork that did infringe on other aspects of life abroad, and four others noted how the different structure of certain classes was challenging to them. Ashley spoke about her difficult classes:

“I focused on my schoolwork a lot, probably more than some of the other students... I ended up doing ten page papers in Spanish... the most I had ever written before that was two or three pages. Sometimes it got in the way of my social life. People went out Thursday nights but I had a class at 8 am on Friday, so I couldn’t really go out and I missed some things.”

Whitney expressed frustration with the differences between school systems:

“[My classes] were 3-credit UConn classes, but they were actually 4-credit classes there. They only came back as 3 credits, but I spent a lot more time in class than I would’ve liked to. There was one class that was taught by the Italian professor, and I don’t know if it was a cultural or a language barrier, but it’s the only class I’ve ever gotten a C+ in... I spent all my time studying for that class and there was no way I could’ve gotten a better grade.”

Ann Marie, who worked and studied hard in France, said that her year abroad was “the hardest thing [she’s] ever done.” As opposed to Chris, who had the firm belief that schoolwork should come last, Ann Marie recognized the importance of her work:

“There are kids who don’t really care about the language aspect, who go for a semester and just want to party and have fun and travel. And that’s cool, I understand... if you’re a pre-vet major and you’re going to be going to med school and working your butt off, of course! Take a semester and travel and have fun. But then... I’m a French major, this is what I’m choosing to do with my life. So for me it was a lot more serious, and I really wanted to concentrate on the language, the culture, and learning as much as possible.”

While harder classes may have detracted from the students' social lives, they may have also enriched their experiences and learning abroad. Paul's story shows that the upper-level classes he took kept him on track to graduate, as well as leading him to unique experiences with Australians:

"I took classes for my major so they were demanding, but they would actually transfer over and be useful here so I wouldn't be a semester behind. Most people didn't do it the way I did. A lot of people just took gen eds and really dumb classes. That's just wasting time... There were mostly Australians in my classes... There was the reef class I took where I was the only American, and then there were the nine days on the island with all the Australians. I did research while I was down there."

It is undeniable that challenging schoolwork may detract from one's immersion into a foreign country. If a student spends most of his or her time cooped up in their room studying, they may be missing out on vital experiences. As Chris elucidated, a person's learning and development abroad might not be primarily attributed to schoolwork. However, enrolling in demanding classes with native students might ultimately be more rewarding than floating through an easy course with familiar Americans from a home university. Paul conducted research on an island with Australians for over a week, and although Ashley and Whitney complained about their language classes, the difficult essays and assignments surely helped them attain their goals of increased language fluency. Personally, I was able to catch a large glimpse of New Zealand culture through my close-knit 200-level Sociology class on 'Pakeha Identity.' Even if my social life did suffer while working on the various assignments and essays, I was able to chat with many New Zealanders during class time and learn from a brilliant New Zealand sociologist. Compared to the 100-level New Zealand history course that I halfheartedly completed with ten other AustraLearn students, 'Pakeha Identity' was an invaluable experience.

It is important to note that Whitney, Ashley, and Ann Marie are a few of the students I interviewed that were very satisfied with their fulfilling study abroad experiences. I believe some of the evidence is right here. They were enrolled in classes with native students, and not just a slew of Americans. They were further immersed in their host locale, as opposed to the students that went through UConn programs that only took joke classes with their friends from home. On the other hand, Chris also had a very rewarding trip. Living in a homestay, he was not constantly surrounded by Americans, and the ease of his classes afforded him the opportunity to go out and talk to people. However, Chris is pursuing a degree in Spanish, and it is not surprising that his instructors would urge him to go out and talk to locals or that he would place a high importance on it: speaking to Spanish people would improve his language skills and is ultimately school-related.

Overall, the schoolwork aspect of a study-abroad trip is not a black-and-white issue. Easy classes could give you the opportunity to have more time in a foreign country; also, hard classes through the university could allow you to immerse yourself. The only harmful classes are not those that are just 'easy,' but when they are easy classes for all the visiting American students. The carefree, tourist-based mindset promoted since orientation continues. It's telling that the students who missed out on cultural experiences were taking easy classes with Americans, while the few that had the most rewarding trips were enrolled in more challenging courses with native students.

COMMUNICATION, MISCOMMUNICATION

Technology

Keeping in touch with loved ones back home can be a great way to ease yourself into a new country. For some people, it can be comforting to take a break from the culture shock and feel a familiar presence. However, one has to wonder whether new technology, which provides an unlimited amount of instant communication, provides a lure away from the host country. Email, instant messaging, and video chats are connecting people across the world like never before. The most popular among my participants was Skype, a program used worldwide that allows people to chat for free, any time. In addition, students can constantly check up on hundreds of friends using Facebook or Myspace or Twitter, they can write blogs or post pictures to keep everyone notified of what they're up to, they can write emails, send text messages, instant message with AIM, and they can communicate with full video and audio using Skype or Google Chat.

Every one of the students I interviewed stated that they used instant-communication programs like Skype or AIM to keep in touch with friends and family back home, usually about once a week. A few said that they used it far more often. For example, Jenny admitted that she used Internet communication "all the time. It's just so easy to. I was up late, so people that were just getting up in the morning. My parents, I called every three to four days. My friends, I sent out emails every week or two weeks. I probably talked to people more than I should have. I probably could have been a little more independent while I was over there." Interestingly, Allison revealed that she talked to her parents more while she was abroad than

she usually talks to them at college: “There [England], I talked to them every other day; here, I talk to them once a week.” In the case of study abroad, the increase in communication technology allows for unprecedented connectivity to a degree that was impossible ten years ago.

In an article titled ‘Web 2.0 Technologies for Digital Students,’ Andone writes how the generation born after 1980 lives in a digital world where technology is pervasive and omnipresent. She discusses the explosion of communication technology, and how “the last years have seen a powerful development of open-source software... long-distance communication went from being expensive (and therefore time-limited) to being essentially free and notions of social software are part of everyday life” (Andone 2008:1). The ‘digital student’ is one that includes “a strong need for instantaneity, a desire to control their environment and to channel their social life via extensive use of technology” (Andone 2008:2). Certainly, the students going abroad fit this description. They travel armed with laptops connected all sorts of Web 2.0 sites, and own credit cards that can withdraw money instantaneously. Worldwide connections are at the tips of their fingertips. With this technology available, it may be difficult to build a support system abroad, as so much support can be found through the Internet.

Abroad in New Zealand, I noticed that programs like AIM and Skype were perpetually running on everyone’s laptop, presenting a gateway to friends back in America. This new technology can act as an easy escape—instead of confiding in a neighbor and making a new trusted contact, one can simply boot up their laptop and relate their problems to someone half a world away. Jenny brought up the idea that she was less independent than she could have

been while she was in Singapore. With the Internet at everyone's disposal, every student that goes abroad can be less independent than they would have had to have been a generation ago. This is an important point for program orientations to recognize and address. Like traveling, balance should be emphasized. There is nothing wrong with using the Internet, but students would probably be more satisfied later if they kept their computer use in moderation and spent quality time with new friends abroad.

Cultural Clashes

Another factor that could attribute to students not getting a fuller appreciation of the country involves cultural confrontations, or more specifically, anti-Americanism. Real or imagined, fear of prejudice could lead one to retreat from public life. Students could become afraid to talk to locals or go out with friends. Although this reason appeared infrequently among interviewee's responses, it is quite a dangerous one that needs to be addressed. If handled improperly, the notion of anti-Americanism could be a serious deterrent to someone's appreciation of the foreign country.

My own experience with this comes from classes and travel. During a weekly discussion for a history course, the teaching assistant would regularly bring up the notion of Americans as uncaring, destructive, and out to rule the world. I knew he didn't have any bad intentions and he wasn't singling me out, but eventually I stopped speaking up in discussion. Problems also arose when we were visiting other parts of the country. For example, a tour guide in the South Island repeatedly made condescending remarks to my group of American friends, such as how we probably couldn't appreciate the splendor of a town because it was too small for us. These

minor encounters weren't terribly heartbreaking, and they were certainly situations that someone could overcome. And yet, they made me quiet and less likely to make connections or learn something new about New Zealand.

Several participants had stories like these. Ann Marie experienced what she called "...prejudice against Americans. Not like they hated Americans, but it was little snippy comments here and there that would kind of get you." She clearly recalled a story from when she was working in a French classroom:

"I was teaching a lesson and the French children were talking about how... the French national team had just won handball. And I was saying 'Wow, I don't know anything about handball'... And the teacher interrupted my lesson and said 'Oh well that's typical America. If it's not in their country they don't care about it.' And I was furious! I wanted to kind of just jump across the room."

Laurie had a similar tale. She was riding the Metro one day with her friend, who had with her a purse covered with pictures of Obama.

"She was using it one day, we were on the Metro, and this old Frenchman came up to us and went off about how Obama's terrible and Bush was bad and how the entire American political system is terrible, and how we're the worst country ever... we just stood there. What do you say? We were like 'sorry.' He asked 'when will Americans realize that you're all awful?'"

Erin also had similar experiences in Greece. She spoke of one:

"Another time I had a bad experience. We were trying to go out one night, and the cab driver charged us way too much. We realized it was an enormous amount of money, and we tried to speak to him, saying we weren't supposed to pay that amount. He started swearing at us, saying we were stupid Americans. We ended up just paying him."

Erin also noted cultural differences that set her apart from the local people:

"One thing I noticed pretty quickly was that no one exercises at all. As I said, we were by a harbor, and it was great for running. I love to run. So we would go running in shorts and a t-shirt, and people would be pointing at us or going like this (rubbing arms and laughing)... That was so weird for them, but we thought 'if this harbor was in America, there'd be people running all over it.'"

Similar to my thoughts on the previous section, I believe the study abroad program should simply educate students and make them aware of the potential dislike they might come across. Participants should know they are not being attacked personally, and not all local people hold the exact same views of Americans. Paul told me how they had an info session during orientation where “they told us about how we should carry ourselves... You could definitely go on the streets and tell who’s an American and who’s not.” I think this is a very important point that every orientation should have. Not only is it concerned with student’s safety, but it is possibly a first step to being accepted and integrated into another society. While it is unfortunately likely that a student will come across some malicious situations while abroad, proper education should assure students that this shouldn’t deter them from future encounters.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the essay, I proposed that as much as students desire interactions with culture, they are not satisfactorily receiving them. The stories and accounts of twenty-five UConn undergraduates have shown this to be true. In addition, my participants have illuminated that this failure can be pinpointed to specific aspects of life abroad. Common struggles, trends, and opinions came up again and again. Clearly, some orientation programs could use renovation. Students greatly wish for a choice when it comes to where and who they

will live with. More attention could be focused on the quality of classes. There are specific ways to evaluate and improve study abroad programs.

Several of my participants had inspiring stories of assimilation and integration. Generally, this was the result of homestays. I have already described this process above, but I think it is important to stress once again that out of ten students that lived with locals, nine had strong cultural interactions, while only two out of the sixteen that did not live with locals enjoyed cultural experiences. With homestays, boundaries break down between visitors and locals and there is constant exchange and learning. In addition, many programs will create support structures for students to fall back on if necessary; Americans are nearby, yet not next door. Homestays are probably not for everyone, but many of my participants desired a choice in terms of their living arrangements. This is an important way to facilitate cultural immersion for students.

There are more ways programs can prepare students for cultural immersion. A few of these options have come through in previous stories but I would like to emphasize and focus on them here. As we have seen, unrealistic or little prior knowledge can play a big role in making students feel alienated and panicky. Perhaps more programs could have pre-trip meetings over the phone or through Skype to let students know what to prepare for. Whitney was one of the few participants who told me she had a good deal of prior knowledge beforehand, as she had visited Italy before, was advanced in the language, and had taken classes on the culture. I think the success of her time abroad could be partially attributed to these factors. Jean, who studied in Toulouse, France for a month, told me about a part of her program that she thought very highly of: students were matched with French 'conversation partners' from Toulouse. Every

week the partners would meet and chat for a couple hours, thereby increasing both their cultural awareness and language proficiency. Both parties learn and benefit from the exchange.

Other students found ways of separating themselves from Americans and breaking into the local culture. Caitlin joined a sports team at her university in Scotland. She was the only participant who told me about taking part in an extracurricular activity, and she enthusiastically described the contacts she made through that venue and how she would go out with the Scottish women every week. Mike completed a demanding internship in Germany. Even though the long hours may have detracted from his traveling, he remarked how his language had greatly improved. As fluency was the main goal he set for himself before leaving, he was very satisfied with the experience. Paul decided to take difficult courses in Australia. He noted how a lot of his peers were simply taking general education courses, which he believed was just 'wasting time.' His research class allowed him a unique experience: nine days on an island with Australians conducting research on coral reefs.

Finally, Ann Marie accepted a challenging job in a Parisian elementary school. She was placed in an American residence, which she was not fond of: "It was difficult to accomplish the fluency level because I lived in an American residence." However, through her job, "I was there at the school a lot and I was always with the other teachers so we would always speak French." Ann Marie was one of my most enthusiastic participants. She noted that it wasn't always easy, but in the end it was a valuable, rewarding experience. "It wasn't fun all the time. I'd say it was harder than anything I've ever done in my life. But I think it's the best decision I've made, ever. I learned so much about myself and I grew up really fast. Experience-wise, learning-wise: ten

plus. A hundred thousand points.” In addition, the money earned from her job was “like a ticket to freedom, I could do what I wanted, it was my money... I could travel on my own, all my expenses. Mommy and Daddy didn’t give me any money.” Like other participants, Ann Marie noted that her program could be positively affected by offering students more choices:

“I really wanted to concentrate on the language, the culture, and learning as much as possible. It’s hard to find a compromise between kids who barely speak French and kids wanting to be fluent. So it’s hard to make suggestions, but I think there should be two separate programs, and you can maybe choose, or take a test, or something. For the kids who really want to learn, it’s hard to learn when you’re living with Americans. You can’t, because you’re not around [French people] all the time. So that’s the only thing I was disappointed with. I wasn’t immersed in French, because I lived with American students.”

She ended the interview by noting that she loved her year in Paris so much she was applying to study abroad in Germany for a full year.

These accounts prove there are many different ways to immerse oneself in a foreign culture. Study abroad programs might be able to partner with local businesses to promote job opportunities or internships, or at least point students in the right direction. Extracurricular activities at the host university could be encouraged, or programs could listen to student’s suggestions and ‘expose’ them to local students, whether through enrollment in university classes or conversation partners. Also, orientations should be evaluated by how well they prepare students for their time abroad, and not so much by the fun activities they provide. In addition, perhaps students could be urged to read up on and research their future locales prior to departure. The accounts I have reproduced here show that while many students regret becoming constrained to a small group of American friends, some were able to break out and enjoy experiences with local peoples and different cultures. Their stories prove that the liberation from Americanizing study abroad is possible.

All the students I talked to were enthusiastic and passionate about their study abroad experiences. Most responded to my emails eagerly, anxious to tell someone else about their time abroad. Some students even ended the interview by thanking me for listening, because many of their friends were sick of hearing them go on and on about study abroad. It's easy to see that study abroad is a wonderful, defining moment of many people's lives. I wholeheartedly endorse the decision to expand programs and encourage more young adults to travel. However, I think expansion should go hand in hand with careful evaluation and analysis. A significant number of students are not fully achieving their goals, and they're regretting experiences they missed out on. Study abroad should be a chance for students to grow, develop, find themselves, learn about a new culture or language, and gain a greater awareness of the world. In addition, it's an opportunity to promote who we are as Americans, and for learning and exchange between many different societies. We have the means to make it a fulfilling, valuable experience; we just need to listen to the stories.

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