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4-1-2000

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Levy, Diane, "The Shock of the Strange, the Shock of the Familiar: Learning from Study Abroad" (2000). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. Paper 204.

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The Shock of the Strange, the Shock of the Familiar: Learning from Study Abroad

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“No matter what happens, travel gives you a story to tell.”—Jewish proverb.

I began writing this as I sat in a borrowed office in the outskirts of London on a strange computer with an unfamiliar keyboard. I blundered my way from my guest house after riding two buses and walking several blocks, *London A to Z* in hand. Cup of white tea and biscuits by my side, I find that this is not a bad setting for writing about the adjustments of study abroad.

Being in a foreign country sharpens the senses. Even in England where we share the basics of language (but not all the vocabulary, as any visitor learns), things are different enough to create situations that sociologists call “anomie”—lack of knowledge of the expectations in social situations. Routine shattered, one must live by one’s wits, as it is impossible to cruise along in the semi-robotic state in which we often live at home. Negotiating everyday events becomes a lesson in resourcefulness—everything from riding the Tube to using the toilet brings on new challenges. The very experience of living requires learning new approaches to situations. And this is the reason that study abroad is a perfect mechanism for honors education.

Specifically in terms of honors, it seems clear that the NCHC basic characteristics regarding the goals of honors education are a perfect fit for study abroad. Experiential learning, first-hand research, enhanced student-faculty interaction, critical thinking, and challenging scholarship all come into play not just in a foreign classroom, but more saliently in the experience of living abroad itself. In keeping with these goals, honors programs have the golden opportunity to offer students the chance to participate in global culture through international travel and study abroad. Whether as a component of a regularly scheduled course, a summer program, or an entire semester or year abroad, the actual experience of travel to a foreign country is an essential and life-changing feature of a global education.

Study Abroad and Learning

As students become immersed in a new culture they open up at least three major areas for learning: the host culture itself, new perspective on their own culture, and self-learning. As all students abroad find out, their coursework is just the smallest part of their learning experience. Dealing with new situations, relationships, and their own reactions to cultural differences offer the bulk of the education. This learning takes place not only during the sojourn, but continues upon return as the students reflect on their experiences and share them with others.

Indeed, the reentry process is another adjustment (or possible crisis) for which students must be prepared and has the potential to become a fruitful opportunity to continue the learning experience.

When students begin study abroad, they are in a period of adjustment on many levels. They must deal with the academic work and perhaps the bureaucracy, rules and customs of a different host educational system. Moreover, they are confronted with strange cultural rituals and patterns. Survival becomes a challenge as they attempt to negotiate new routines of everyday life. What exactly are the rules of behavior and interpersonal relationships? Did I really understand that conversation? What could this menu item (e.g., “bangers and mash”) be? What is expected of me in this situation? These questions are recurrent and persistent and can produce uncertainty and discomfort for the visitor. Indeed, this unpleasantness is a major part of the predictable pattern known as “culture shock,” defined as the “emotional reactions to the disorientation that occurs when one is immersed in an unfamiliar culture and is deprived of familiar cues”(Paige, 1993). When Oberg (1960) first talked of culture shock, he conceived it as an actual illness—complete with clinical symptoms and cures. In the past several decades, social scientific studies of culture shock (Adler, 1975) have placed it solidly in the realm of the social rather than the medical worlds as they identified the typical stages of the experience and suggested possible mechanisms for coping. It seems inevitable that students will experience some of the effects of culture shock, and therefore it is crucial that any study abroad program prepare the student for it. Even better, honors study abroad programs could not only prepare students for the anticipation of culture shock, but use its many facets to enhance the learning experience and personal development. As Adler states, “the process of adaptation to cultural shock can be described as a depth experience beginning with the encounter of a different culture that becomes an encounter with the self.”

It would seem useful to deconstruct the phenomenon of culture shock into several components to anticipate students’ experiences and the potential learning opportunities. Culture shock involves complex feelings and reactions of both loss and change which can ultimately lead to personal growth: loss in terms of homesickness, loneliness for friends and family, and the absence of the familiar—familiar sights, sounds, food, objects that makes us feel comfortable, and interpersonal communication styles. Loss of these familiar cues of interaction such as language, non-verbal cues, norms and customs of everyday life (how do things work? what is funny? how do I eat?) can result in feelings of isolation, helplessness, confusion, and being “out of sync.” Unaccustomed attitudes toward time and the course of events can result in anger and frustration. For example, Americans expect “yes” or “no” answers to inquiries, not “As God wishes.” Huh? Does that mean yes or no?

The other aspect of culture shock—change—introduces new challenges, unfamiliar customs, bureaucratic structures, attitudes, values, and relationships we must learn in order to get along. To adopt these new norms involves the ability to be open-minded, take risks, and make mistakes—indeed, break out of the home cultural frame of mind and adopt the new culture’s point of view, and make adjustments to one’s identity in the process (Weaver, 1993). Travelers who have taken these steps can likely relate stories of feeling foolish or silly as they engage in the unfamiliar. It’s no wonder student sojourners who experience the initial elation

of a foreign country long to hide in their rooms and eat cheeseburgers when it all becomes a bit overwhelming.

Students need to be taught that this is a predictable reaction to living abroad. Today scholars generally agree that there are four stages to the culture shock process (Furnam, 1984): 1) fascination with the new culture, yet realizing barriers exist between the visitor and the host; 2) hostility and frustration with new culture and emphasis on superiority of home culture; 3) improvement and adjustment with decreasing tension and increasing humor; and 4) biculturalism where sojourner develops a fuller understanding of host culture. Here is a personal example: while I was living in Europe for a year in the early 1980's, my reaction to cozy smoke-filled cafes changed from quaint amusement—"Isn't this neat?"(stage 1) to disgust—"why isn't there a no smoking section like we have at home?" (stage 2) to resigned acceptance and appreciation of cultural differences—"oh well, the smoke is bad but the food is great." (stages 3 and 4).

How can honors programs prepare student sojourners for the inevitable? It is crucial that honors programs and study abroad offices offer a thorough orientation for the student traveler, not just in the academic, but also the emotional side of travel abroad. These programs exist in many schools and offer students a chance to learn about the host culture, talk to other students who have gone abroad, and learn the basics of intercultural communication. Orientation programs are critical in that the degree of adjustment difficulties experienced by student sojourners has been shown to be related to their prior expectations (Martin, et al 1995). The researchers found, in a study of 248 student sojourners, that the more the student's prior expectations are met or positively violated (i.e. the actual experience was better than expected), the better the evaluation of the entire sojourn. Unrealistic expectations are a source of much disappointment in students' early foreign experiences. I remember as a 21-year-old student stepping off the plane on a dreary London day and being rather put out that not only was I not met on the tarmac by the Beatles, but that London was not at all like the Charles Dickens vision I expected. Thus it is crucial for pre-trip planning to include development of realistic expectations rather than a totally optimistic projection. Things will go wrong, they will be lost and homesick, and Prince William will not be on the jetway to greet them upon arrival. Students need to be clued into various coping strategies: bring along reminders of home, feel empowered by learning about some simple "do's" and "don'ts" of the host culture, and make attempts to interact with the host nationals.

Many types of orientation programs and guides to travel are in existence—the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, for example, has a web page with an introduction to culture shock and suggestions for coping; UNCW provides students with a bookmark with the stages of cultural shock and tips for a successful transition. Going beyond these initial orientations, honors programs can use the cultural shock experience as a planned learning tool in the study abroad process. How can this be achieved?

1. The actual **study of the culture shock pattern** as a component of the course would assist students in recognizing and coping with the adjustment process. Learn about the stages, be familiar with the research, know what to expect.

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2. Teach students about the **concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism**, and have them examine these in their own lives. A truthful facing-up to one's own prejudices and stereotypes about foreigners and members of other cultural groups will assist in the adjustment process.
 3. Have the students keep a **journal** of their experiences and especially their reactions to intercultural differences—perhaps organized by categories such as people, food, language, customs, stories, pleasant surprises, disappointments, etc. Reading these over time gives students insight into how far they have progressed.
 4. Encourage the students to be involved in **independent travel** while abroad (as if they need encouragement...). Gmelch (1997) found that in many years of taking students abroad in structured university programs, the independent travel they engage in on their own time has had major impacts on their learning experiences—perhaps more so than the classroom work. As students travel on their own, they learn from the need to "... constantly make decisions and deal with the demands of life in new and unfamiliar settings" (1997:475). The result was that, in having to cope with the unpredictability of travel, solving problems, making decisions about time and money, and learning to deal with their traveling companions, they became "...more confident, self-reliant, and adaptable" (1997:486). This, indeed, is what we in honors call experiential learning, and it is crucial that programs seize these learning opportunities for students to venture off on their own.
 5. Students will vary in their degree of independence and insecurity, and those who develop the strength to venture out, take risks and get lost a bit will benefit most from the experience. They need to be encouraged to leave their former identities on the home campus and, however threatening, get **immersed in the host culture**.
 6. Work with students to **view their home country from the perspective of an outsider**. Just as fish are oblivious to the water in which they swim, members of a society are ignorant of its basic assumptions and rules. Bill Bryson in his book, *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*, says, "Nothing makes you feel more like a native of your own country than to live where nearly everyone is not"(1999:3). Use this precious opportunity to assist students in the analysis of American culture from the stranger's point of view. The stranger or outsider is in a much better place to observe the taken for granted norms than the natives and can offer much new insight into the familiar. As an example, the US "love affair" with guns and its generous gun-owning policies and consequent gun violence are viewed as absolutely crazy by most of the outside world. A British physician told me that in her 20 years of practice in inner-city London hospitals, she had never once seen a gunshot wound. Even a short visit abroad will give the American another way of looking at our cultural understandings and the insight that it can be different elsewhere. As Shannon (1995:98) says, through study abroad, "...Americans learn one of the most important lessons of their life: The 'American Way' is not necessarily the best, the most efficient, or the smartest."

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7. Emphasize to students that a **bad experience with culture shock can ruin their sojourn**—it has the potential of not only spoiling the “fun” aspect of the trip, but damaging the learning potential as well. The student who is miserable or hostile, or who hides out in the dorm, is hardly likely to get the most learning and personal development from the experience. The goal ought to be to work toward stage 4 of the process.

No matter how enriching an international experience, there comes a time when students must return home—to family, friends, and home campus. Reentry poses a potential for reverse culture shock, and students are rarely prepared for the unfamiliarity of returning home. Shannon (1995) argues that students learn more abroad than they realize, and often do not assimilate this until their return. Even though they have longed for the familiar while away, it all feels strange back home. Students may miss the foreign cultural habits they had adopted. As Shannon says, returning students “...realize that they are suffering from a malady without a name: a homesickness for a place that isn’t home”(1995:102). At this point hopefully they begin to understand that they are capable of learning new ways of life and being at home anywhere. This is a valuable lesson and one that flourishes under the discussion and analysis of like-situated individuals.

While most universities offer some pre-trip orientation, very few offer students any formal program for, or even insight into, the reentry process. Research has established that reentry has many of the same features as the initial culture shock and varies with the degree of immersion in the new culture. In his study of student returnees, LaBrack reported that reentering students experienced difficulty because they had idealized their home cultures while away. They unconsciously expected that all at home would remain the same and were startled by any changes in the home environment. On returning home to America after 20 years in England, author Bill Bryson (1999) waxed rhapsodic over such Americanisms as the “dizzying abundance of absolutely everything,” including garbage disposals, junk food, and automobile cup-holders. He, however, was dismayed by American wastefulness, environmental insensitivity, and the McDonaldization of everything. Some authors conclude that the more comfortable the sojourner becomes in the new culture, the more difficult the transition home. In the worst case, “The failure to successfully meet the challenge of reverse culture shock can result in confusion and alienation or geographical expatriation or psychological expatriation. The extreme result is a zealous conversion to the new culture, not unlike a cult experience” (Hogan 1983). Heaven help the honors director who has to explain this to a frantic parent!

Honors programs and study abroad instructors can assist students with converting reentry shock into a learning experience in a similar fashion as for culture shock:

1. Can you go home again? Yes, but don’t expect home or its inhabitants to be just like they were when you left. **Encourage students to keep in touch** with family and friends at home (Brabant, et al, 1990). Keeping abreast of day-to-day developments can ease the transition upon return. This has been greatly simplified in recent years by the ease of e-mail and cheap phone cards.
2. Assist students to **use their new insight** to realize how their values, attitudes and expectations have been shaped by their home culture, and now their new

host culture. Foreign travel experiences and seeing the world as a stranger can have a dramatic impact on one's view of the meaning of life and one's place in it (McNamee and Faulkner, 1999). Research has shown that students who study abroad receive long-lasting benefits—they even do better academically upon return to their home campuses. Their minds have been expanded forever!

3. Now that students have acculturated to their new environment and developed a taste for crusty breads or smelly cheeses, they must realize that their **new preferences are not likely to be available at home** (at least not at reasonable prices!). The same reaction as the original culture shock may occur when the newly familiar is not available in the old culture.
4. Students will return more enlightened perhaps about language, art, architecture, customs, foods, etc of their new culture, but they should realize that **people at home will easily tire** of their comparisons. Just as it is difficult to describe to someone how a Godiva chocolate tastes, it will be difficult to expect others to really understand your foreign experiences. Provide avenues for returning students to seek out others with similar experiences to share.
5. Most important academically, honors programs should provide opportunities for students to **continue the conversation and reflection upon their return**. Many study abroad courses have analysis and reflection as a built-in component. Others may offer returning students the opportunity to meet with prospective students and the general public to share their insights. For example, this year at UNCW, the Office of International Programs hosted a seminar as part of “intercultural week” entitled “The Young and the Restless,” which involved recent graduates talking of their international careers.

With appropriate training for the pitfalls of culture and reentry shock, the inherent benefits of international experiences for an honors education can be realized. How, then, can honors programs integrate study abroad into their programs? Must they offer long-term study abroad opportunities? Clearly, the model international experience for honors would involve an immersion-type foreign experience in which students live outside an enclave of Americans, interact regularly with students and others from the host country, operate somewhat independently of a guide or overly protective instructor, and involve substantial reflection upon return. However, even relatively short-term programs are valuable and may lead to further desire for foreign travel, study, and learning. Honors programs can beneficially offer short-term guided trips (say, over spring break or a winter term) to give students a taste for international travel and learning, and do these at a reasonable cost and no disruption to their course of study.

Short-term Honors Study Abroad: An Example

Honors programs can offer study abroad experiences with attention to the realities of culture shock and reentry shock even in a short-term framework. The following example is one in which I was involved as an instructor and would be adaptable to many other honors programs.

In spring semester 1996, the UNCW Honors Scholars Program offered a section of a one-credit enrichment seminar with the focus on London, modeled on a City as Text® approach. For the first half of the semester, the class met weekly for an historical and cultural overview of the city. Guest speakers familiar with London introduced the students to their specialties. Each student then chose an aspect for further study. Some topics were London bridges, Keats in London, the Blitz, the tabloids, The Beatles' London, Jack the Ripper, and the plague. The highlight of the course was a visit to London during spring break where the students participated in group events such as a tour of the British Museum, a walking tour of the East End with a curry dinner, and lectures by British professors at a London university. While in London, the students conducted first hand research on their research topics providing each student with a focus that organized his or her free time and point of view (see also Noran, 1995). This came to be a crucial aspect of the course, giving students opportunities to specialize in an area and later share their expertise with others.

Twenty students and three instructors went on the trip. Prior to leaving, there was a one-evening orientation to the logistics of the visit, which included a proper English meal and visiting students from English universities. The students were similar in their excitement and anticipation, but not their experiences. For many, it was their first time abroad or even out of North Carolina. Certainly, many had never been in a big city on their own. As part of the course, each student was required to take a day-trip out of London to a town of their choice such as Oxford or Bath. As mentioned earlier, research has shown that independent student travel, as distinct from the study abroad academic experience, is a rich source of learning self-sufficiency, self-esteem, and resourcefulness (Gmelch, 1997). As the students made their way in and out of London on the tube, buses, and railway, they developed a new sense of empowerment. Even though traveling to a foreign country with 20 undergraduates is a bit daunting, we managed to bring them all back safely and have the joy of watching them grow in knowledge and self-confidence.

A key feature of the class was reflection. Upon return, the class met to share experiences, present their projects orally, and collaborate in a class album. Each student's presentation reflected his or her expertise on the research topic and also his or her personal growth. I think it is informative to know that of the 20 students in the course, one went on to a full-year International Student Exchange Program (ISEP) exchange in France; one enrolled in the Honors Semester in New York the following year (another foreign country?); three went on to participate in semester study abroad programs in Wales or Australia, and one married her British boyfriend and went to live in England! The week in London was just a taste—but one that whet their appetite for more international experiences. They had become citizens of the world!

Conclusion

Globalization is a fact of modern life involving increasing economic cooperation and competition between nations and regions of the world, environmental interdependence, and the increasing ethnic and religious diversity of our home communities. Our students are likely to work and interact with persons of many cultural backgrounds. Our graduates will be involved with the world outside the US,

as even small business must deal with the issues of international trade, currency, and production. Travel and tourism are forecasted to become the largest world-wide income earner in the early decades of the 21st century. As the world is becoming more interdependent, the imperatives for global education are growing, and universities are responding by placing more emphasis and resources in international education. The American Council on Education (ACE) has called for changes in how institutions of higher education educate students about the world by calling for expanded emphasis on foreign language training and the understanding of cultural and global issues (ACE, 1995). Honors programs have a special mission in preparing their students for the global age. This will require honors programs to operate within the larger university goals relative to the increasing international dimension. Part of this process will involve working to lessen the obstacles which currently thwart students in their efforts to study abroad by finding creative solutions for scheduling, funding, and integrating international experiences into students' educational careers.

As we look toward the future, international experiences will no longer be viewed as "frills" on a college resume, but will increasingly become requirements for employment and advanced study. It is up to us as educators to ensure that the possible negative outcomes of culture and reentry shock do not detract from the potential for true personal growth and leaning that is a realistic outcome of a study abroad experience.

As for my own reflection, now that I am safely back in my own office in North Carolina, surrounded by the souvenirs and academic trappings of my sojourn to England, I feel fortunate for the experience and the opportunity to share it with my students. The English breakfast tea I brought home is brewing, my e-mail from a colleague in England is on the screen, and the class notes I took are already dog-eared. My life is subtly, yet forever enriched, and I wish for the same for my colleagues and students.

Acknowledgment

Many thanks to my husband, Dr. Gary Faulkner, professor of sociology and former director of international programs at UNCW, for sharing his considerable insight and experience with me.

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