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The Honors Differential: At Home and Abroad

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Study abroad constitutes already the kind of enrichment that defines honors education at home. The honors component of instruction at home in the U.S. emerges from the differential between the regular course of instruction and the extension, or rather qualitative enrichment, of the same through various types of added conceptual complexity, scope of detail, depth of inquiry, or level of skill. That honors differential can be tracked visibly and explicitly onto a syllabus in a regular course through highlighted assignments for eligible students; or can be embedded invisibly and implicitly in a designated honors course the syllabus for which makes it distinct from both a regular course on the same or related topic and from an advanced departmental course. In study abroad, the honors differential is, likewise, invisibly and implicitly present already by virtue of the changed cultural context of instruction and daily life. Study abroad galvanizes at the forefront of student consciousness what Lionel Trilling once called a “culture’s hum and buzz of implication” (206) or the dense imbrications of background cultural assumptions that, literally, go without saying in one’s familiar home culture. Study abroad constitutes, in effect, an honors experience for one and all and marks for most students their first and most profound direct encounter with another culture and indirectly with their own. Students experience and gain a new level of comparative cultural consciousness and sophistication.

Honors credit for honors students studying abroad, then, has to capture the honors differential that is already there, make it explicit, and raise it to consciousness in order to reveal its implications. A journal or blog of reflections on cultural differences provides the best opportunity to register the nuances of experience that depart from the familiar. However, the journal cannot remain simply a chronicle of one’s activities abroad; rather, the annotation of experiences comprises the basic structure onto which the student tracks her/his reflections on cultural difference. The day-to-day chronicle is therefore the necessary foundation for the sort of meta-cognition or higher-level reflection that defines honors but is itself not honors work. In order to help the student articulate and maintain that higher level of self-reflection on cultural difference in different contexts, the Hofstra University Honors

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College (HUHC) requires the elaboration in advance (under advisement) of ten categories of culture, adapted to the student's interests, area of study, and planned activities. Generally, the categories are based in part on traditional disciplines at the university that also define, abstractly and inevitably, dimensions of the student's experience such as transportation, food, economics, history, language, art forms, politics, geography, and urban planning. Such categories help the student extend and generalize from a discrete, local, and personal incident or observation to more far-reaching considerations about a culture.

For the HUHC, the only required category is the initial description of the student's situation in the host country—including housing, location, and resources, for example—as the cornerstone of future observations in order to establish the student's self-conscious position and perspective in the host culture. Students may use their experience in a formal course (on whatever topic) as one category: for example, a theater class in London, an archaeology course in Ireland, or a business course in China. Also, discussion of possible categories will sometimes stipulate certain experiences, such as reading a novel set in that city or visiting certain museums. The categories can be altered, if necessary, and made more specific or changed completely during the study abroad as circumstances change. In any case, however, the categories should not contain, limit, or constrain the student's experiences or reflections but rather provide a way of passing beyond personal impression to earnest cultural insight or conjecture, from what first appears as oddity or inconvenience to a reflection on different values in the host culture. For example, students in Germany noted that subway escalators stopped when not in use; that toilets had two flush options; that city recycling collection required five or six different receptacles; and that plastic bags cost money at the supermarket. Students then began to reflect at each new turn on that society's different relation to the use of resources and personal responsibility in society on multiple levels and in terms of individual consumption.

This sort of reflective journal amplifies the students' awareness of their own experiences in larger terms and encourages the student to engage in new experiences beyond the program's regular itinerary. The proliferation of "luxury international-travel opportunities," as noted by Carolyn Haynes, could have the contrary effect of the journal and undercut the benefits of study abroad by isolating the experience in a comfortable class structure or bubble that reduces 'culture shock' and reflection while encouraging facile perceptions and familiar stereotypes or just casual tourism (or worse), as Haynes recounts quoting Ben Feinberg.

The sort of Honors Abroad journal I describe also avoids the situation of a student trying to earn honors credit in a course or content area through

strictly academic work that might entail more time in the laboratory or library but that ignores the culture in which the academic work is being done. The purpose of honors abroad is, on the contrary, to encourage students to experience more fully and broadly their time in a different culture as opposed to just pursuing their discipline or a given academic course content more deeply as they would at home for honors credit. Depth in a discipline is desirable, but academic honors credit abroad should not serve to narrow experience until after the student has attained an advanced level in a discipline as well as cultural familiarity and linguistic proficiency in the host culture; such narrowing might be appropriate in the second semester of a year abroad or with prior experience in that culture.

Ideally, an honors abroad experience and journal would figure as, if not a capstone, then at least a milestone in a cumulative portfolio (usually now electronic) of a student's work both in and outside of the major. Some schools require a cumulative portfolio of all students or of students in specific schools, divisions, or disciplines; other schools require none. In any case, the honors abroad journal stands in reciprocal and mutually enriching relation to academic work done in other areas, and a portfolio makes that relation more evident.

Preliminary discussion and review after the study abroad helps the student prepare to gain depth of experience and reflection, though that cannot be guaranteed. The reviewer of the honors abroad journal and/or (e-)portfolio can question, probe, and ask for amplification and elaboration to press students, after the fact, for further degrees of reflection as part of their learning outcomes. Questions tailored to their circumstances and experiences might include: Is one particular instance/observation representative? In that particular instance, what exactly was different from what you're used to? How? What was your first impression of the rationale or logic of that circumstance? Did it make sense to you? Why or why not? What implications do you see? Did another alternate logic become apparent to you? How does the host culture view the same? Why?

Because of the focus on different cultural contexts, an honors abroad journal, since it is not bound to a particular course, can apply to internships, service programs, or any organized activity abroad, allowing for a greater breadth of possible experiences and funding opportunities. Ideally, the honors differential experienced and articulated abroad will translate afterward back into the student's life, academic and otherwise, at home, ever after.

REFERENCE

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