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Interdisciplinary Study Abroad as Experiential Learning

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Interdisciplinary study abroad as experiential learning Études interdisciplinaires à l'étranger en tant qu'apprentissage expérimentiel

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Abstract

Although study abroad would appear to be an ideal context for the learning through doing and reflecting that constitutes experiential education, if it fails to be rigorously approached as experiential learning, it not only falls short of its potential, but also risks reinforcing rather than confounding consumerist assumptions and behaviours in education. Co-authored by five former undergraduate academic exchange participants and their professor and interdisciplinary Arts and Science Program director (who had remained at the home university), this article explores the need and various possibilities for programming that would pay more than lip service to the idea of international study as experiential learning. Facilitation of ongoing critical reflection and meaningful connections among students returning from study abroad, those arriving from elsewhere, and those at the home institution who had not studied abroad presents itself as a significant post-sojourn opportunity, with the potential to contribute to the transformation and internationalization of the institution itself.

Résumé

Quoique étudier à l'étranger puisse apparaître comme un contexte idéal pour l'apprentissage par la pratique et la réflexion qui constitue l'éducation expérientielle, s'il n'est pas rigoureusement abordé en tant qu'apprentissage expérientiel, non seulement il n'atteint pas son potentiel, mais il risque également de renforcer plutôt que de confondre les assomptions et comportements consuméristes en éducation. Co-écrit par cinq anciens participants d'échange académique de premier cycle, et leur professeur et directeur de programme interdisciplinaire en arts et science (qui est resté à l'université d'origine), cet article explore le besoin et les diverses possibilités pour une programmation qui manifesterait plus d'intérêt à l'idée d'étude internationale en tant qu'apprentissage expérientiel. La facilitation de la réflexion critique continue et des rapports significatifs entre les étudiants qui reviennent des études à l'étranger, ceux qui arrivent d'ailleurs, et ceux de l'institution d'origine qui n'avaient pas étudié à l'étranger, se présente comme une opportunité post-séjour importante, ayant le potentiel de contribuer à la transformation et à l'internationalisation de l'institution elle-même.

Keywords: study abroad, experiential learning, undergraduate education, internalization, institutional transformation

Mots clés: études à l'étranger ; apprentissage expérimentiel ; éducation de premier cycle ; internationalisation ; transformation institutionnelle

Introduction

Throughout Canada and the United States, experiential learning in postsecondary education appears to be ubiquitous, so widespread is its promotion by colleges and universities, large and small.¹ From major research-intensive institutions with high international rankings to more modest, faith-based, academic communities dedicated to

¹ See, for example, the “experiential learning report” of the Council of Ontario Universities (2014), *Bringing Life to Learning at Ontario Universities*. Experiential learning has become “a buzzword” (Dehaas, 2012), so heavily is it being promoted, albeit along a spectrum of understandings of the term.

undergraduate studies, institutions are seeking ways to incorporate experiential education across the curriculum.² Very simply defined as “learning from experience or learning by doing” (Lewis & Williams, 1994, p. 5), experiential learning has its roots in the work of educators such as John Dewey, whose pioneering *Experience and Education* (1938) presents the following vision:

To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world.” (pp. 19-20)

In practical terms, as Lewis and Williams explain, “Experiential education first immerses learners in an experience and then encourages reflection about the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking” (p. 5). In contrast to familiar approaches to teaching and learning, which privilege the traditional classroom as a site of prescribed knowledge transfer and are predicated on the acceptance of professorial authority, disciplinary segregation, and other isolating practices of the ivory tower, experiential education opens up fresh possibilities for active—indeed, interactive—and interdisciplinary learning in myriad contexts, including those presented by the challenging situations of study abroad.

In this more progressive pedagogical model, the focus shifts to a student-centred environment, where learners take greater responsibility for their education and consumerist practices yield to personally meaningful investments in the process of discovery. Stimulated by interdisciplinary inquiry and innovative modes of evaluation that foster creativity, community engagement, and critical self-exploration, students feel encouraged to venture into unfamiliar territory, make connections between their studies and their lives, and reflect critically on their experience. Study abroad would appear to be an ideal context for the learning through doing and reflecting that constitutes experiential education (as discussed in Vande Berg, Paige, & Lou, 2012; see also Passerelli & Kolb, 2012); if students were to take advantage of international study options, it seems self-evident that they would be engaged in experiential learning and that their professors, supervisors, and program administrators would be making a vital contribution to the promotion of innovative educational practices. If in its execution, however, study abroad fails to be seriously regarded as experiential learning, it not only falls short of its potential, but also risks reinforcing rather than confounding consumerist assumptions and behaviours in education.

The following article explores the need and various possibilities for programming that would pay more than lip service to the idea of international study as experiential learning. Co-authored by five recent B.Arts Sc. (Honours) graduates upon their return from international academic exchange and their professor/program director (who had remained at the home university in Canada), this article investigates to what extent the students’

² In the authors’ local context of Hamilton, Ontario, for example, this applies not only to McMaster University, the large, research-intensive institution with which we are affiliated, but also to Redeemer University College, a considerably smaller, Christian, liberal arts institution, which advertises the inclusion of “a variety of experiential learning opportunities—co-operative education, internships, practicums, and off-campus study programs—directly into [its] academic programs” (2016, para. 1).

international studies approached Dewey's ideal. Despite very positive reports from all five students, the case study reveals nevertheless how far from the ideal their experiential learning abroad remained, how inadequate the programming had been, and how crucial the careful incorporation of critical reflection therefore becomes, before, during, and certainly after the return from international exchange.³ In "Experiential Pedagogy for Study Abroad: Educating for Global Citizenship," Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002, p. 43) address the central issue bluntly: "But isn't study abroad by definition experiential education? No." As they explain,

Although it is a commonly held belief that study abroad is experiential by definition (Katula and Threnhauser, 1990), there are many study abroad programs that do not put into practice the principles of experiential education. While all study abroad programs hold the potential for experiential education, there is a continuum within study abroad from programs that simply transfer academic credits from one traditional discipline-based institution to another without intentionally utilizing the international experience as the basis for learning, to those that try to incorporate some aspects of experiential education such as the use of learning contracts to programs whose design is thoroughly grounded in the principles of experiential education. (p. 43)

Indeed, experiences are "not educational in and of themselves" (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, p. 43), and while study abroad for the five undergraduates had been challenging, enriching, and certainly highly valued, automatic characterizations of it as transformative or life-changing would be at best cliché. As the six co-authors engaged in the process of critical reflection and self-scrutiny that this study demanded, they discovered such false assumptions and misleading language in their own discourses of international academic exchange. Thus, the co-authorship of this article has become an important part of the experiential learning journey.

The promotion of experiential learning in postsecondary education

As elsewhere, at the authors' institution, whose purpose "from its inception," as articulated by its president, Patrick Deane (2011, p. 2), "has [...] been through education and research to develop and realize the potential both of individuals and of society at large," experiential learning is being enthusiastically promoted; it features prominently, for example, in Deane's landmark document *Forward with Integrity* (2011), which outlines the principles and priorities that are guiding McMaster University now and in planning for the future. Defined to include activities such as community service learning, volunteer work, field experience, and the completion of a practicum, internship, clinical assignment, or co-op placement, experiential education is identified in the planning document as a critical factor in student engagement and "key both to the future quality and to the sustainability of our programs" (Deane, p. 7). Study abroad escapes mention as an example of experiential learning; the focus is on the categories of the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement, which "indicates that more than 80% of first-year students in participating research-intensive universities will undertake or have completed practicum, internship, field

³ As Plews, Breckenridge, Cambre, and Fernandes (2014), in a related context, contend: "The challenge . . . remains . . . of committing people, thought, and resources so that international programming is less a question of haphazard learning through exposure that relies on chance and individual initiative for substance and more a period of planned, guided, and critically reflective . . . engagement. The shift from circumstantial to intentional engagement can only make these programs more worthwhile" (pp. 71-72).

experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment and will do or have done community service or volunteer work” (Deane, p. 6). Whether or not study abroad is included, however, such snapshots of student involvement can be misleading. While they may, as is the case here, point to an impressive number of students assumed to be engaged in experiential education, they may also fail to consider the possibility that “experience not reflected upon is simply not learning” (Rivkah Unland, qtd. in Spurgaitis, 2007, p. 35). This relates to the conceptual slippages identified by Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) in common understandings of academic exchange: the latter’s synonymy with experiential education is taken as a given. When, as above, myriad, wide-ranging activities are equated with experiential learning, how much more easily is study abroad, a source of exceptional experience, mistaken for a self-evident example of such education, one so obvious as to be assumed.

Alternative approaches

A fundamental insight of Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002, p. 43) informs our study: “While it has been applied to the fields of cooperative education, internships, outdoor education, organizational development and training, and service learning, the principles of experiential education can also be used to transform traditional classrooms and study abroad experiences.” In 2013-14, of the five co-authors who were third-year undergraduates at the time, none a second-language major, three studied at the University of Copenhagen and two at the University of Amsterdam; they were neither part of a group nor accompanied by any faculty or staff facilitators. Their individual, one-semester, international sojourns included exposure not only to Danish or Dutch, but also to new disciplinary languages, practices, and understandings. The students’ starting point as part of an innovative community of learning is best explained in a volume edited by Jenkins, Ferrier, and Ross (2004), which explores the place of McMaster University’s undergraduate Arts and Science Program in a research-intensive university. Jenkins et al. make clear that, at McMaster, “Arts and Science” does not refer to a general Faculty, but to a distinctive, interdisciplinary program; Deane (2011, p. 5) highlights this same program as a “bold creation,” an innovative move “to escape the constraints of a discipline- or department-centred curriculum.” Its three major objectives are to enable substantial work in both the arts and the sciences; to develop analytical, research, and communication skills; and to foster the art of scholarly inquiry into matters of public concern. While an integrated set of core courses establishes common ground, students use their considerable elective room to pursue studies in a wide range of disciplines. All students are introduced to practices of experiential learning, a significant number of them study abroad, and of course they all spend much of their time in the traditional classroom. Those who have participated in study abroad programs are particularly well prepared to engage in critical debate about a related and growing preoccupation in higher education: internationalization.

As articulated in Deane’s *Forward with Integrity* (2011, p. 11), neither experiential nor international education should “be thought of as simply an add-on to the student experience.” Indeed, both “require us to radically re-think everything that makes up a course of study, the ways in which we should seek to evaluate students’ performance, and what should be the shape and content of the curriculum” (p. 11). Both, furthermore, “have an ethical dimension which requires attention: just as in service learning, the student’s relation to the community must be mutually beneficial, in the internationalization of the

academy it is not enough for the world to serve as a subject for study [or] a source of students [coming to us]—the university must become different in the process of internationalizing itself” (p. 11). If the “heart” of internationalization, as Deane contends, is “the transformation of the university *on its own ground*” (p. 11), facilitation of meaningful connections among three groups of students—those returning from study abroad, those who remained at the home university, and those who have come from elsewhere on academic exchange—presents itself as a significant opportunity for such transformation. This aligns with a key challenge for educators involved in study abroad programming: how to assist returning students in the process of integrating all that they have learned on exchange, in order that they are not left, in the words of one of the student authors of this paper, “not knowing what to do about feeling different”—differently oriented, differently equipped, and/or differently invested. Students returning from semesters abroad often find themselves with insufficient means of, as it were, bringing their learning home, of moving “forward with integrity,” in all senses of the term, in a relatively barren after-international study landscape.

To approach study abroad more intentionally as education both experiential and international, one might consider the “learning portfolio,” a “document that evolves qualitatively as a reflective process to represent the dynamic nature of engaged learning” (Zubizarreta, 2008, p. 1) and has emerged, at least theoretically, as an accessible means of developing and articulating students’ insights, critical perspectives, values, and assessments of their learning journeys. A tool to allow students to collect “assignments and reflections around their educational experience,” as Bowness (2014, p. 21) puts it, the learning portfolio recently has been introduced at the authors’ institution, with the intention that it serve as a diary of learning goals, opportunities, challenges, resources, and discoveries. Ideally, it promotes open-mindedness, the capacity to self-evaluate, and an opportunity to recognize one’s limitations as well as one’s strengths. Given the risk of its being used as a simple record of achievement, however, we argue that it would be prudent to regard the learning portfolio as only one among many potentially valuable components of an internationalizing after-study abroad culture, rather than as a panacea to address the current paucity of reflective mechanisms and integrative structures in post-secondary institutions.

While forms of experiential education are normally conceived of as taking place outside the classroom, it would be a mistake, as Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002) suggest, to overlook the possibilities for similarly engaged learning inside the classroom. Moreover, while Deane (2011, p. 8) rightly maintains that “Experiential, service-, cooperative and problem-based learning, community-based and undergraduate research . . . are all manifestations of an academic commitment to *relevance*” (emphasis added), the issue of relevance has been complicated by literary and educational theorist Northrop Frye, who defines it broadly as “a vision of the human possibilities connected with that subject” (2000, p. 459). In his writings on education, Frye contends that “No subject is more relevant than another: it is only [students] who can establish the relevance of what [they study] and the student who does not accept this responsibility does not deserve the name of student” (p. 425). If we take this notion seriously, we begin to see how the literature classroom, to take just one example, might become a site of deep experiential learning, where students are encouraged to claim the relevance of literary study, to “own their own learning,” as Zubizarreta (2008, p. 6), an advocate of the learning portfolio, puts it, and to exercise their

own critical and creative power. The five co-authors who had studied abroad were, upon their return, enrolled in a full-year Literature course taught by the sixth co-author of this paper. In September, Homer's *Odyssey* (1998) presented a fundamental issue that the returning students themselves were facing: the problem of how to reintegrate oneself without succumbing to the binary trap of either denying the experiential journeys of those at home—uncritically adopting the assumption that nothing has changed in one's absence—or denying one's own development by collapsing back into familiar patterns of behaviour and thought.

In what follows, reflections on the study abroad experiences of each of the five former undergraduates are presented, along with suggestions for more effective programming. We focus in particular on the development of a meaningful after-study abroad culture, which would offer structured, critically reflective opportunities both outside and inside courses such as the one in which the six co-authors, along with other class participants, explored the *Odyssey*. Beyond a reminder of the central question of study abroad as experiential learning, the five student authors were not issued any particular brief to guide their contributions. After an initial group conversation facilitated by the faculty author about the challenges and successes of their respective homecomings, they were invited to comment freely on their individual experiences before, during, and after the international sojourn. It is unsurprising that the student authors centre their reflections on the process of bringing their learning home after studying abroad, for this challenge emerged as a common theme in the preliminary discussion. The article was conceived and written in the academic year after the students' return from their study abroad; thus, the reflective practices involved in the writing process coincided with ongoing reintegration efforts. Like the faculty member/Arts and Science Program director, all five student authors—four female and one male—were born and raised in Canada, and the students were twenty years old while on the one-semester academic exchange. As acknowledged in "Study Abroad Experience V," one student had family ties to the host country.

Study abroad experience I

Before leaving Canada, I expected that my studies at the University of Copenhagen and my exploration of a different culture would be transformative. While my time in Denmark was certainly positive, upon reflection, I see that my own actions and attitudes played a larger role in shaping my study abroad experience than my physical and cultural surroundings did; simply *being* in a foreign environment was not inherently transformative. Moreover, as Dewey contends in *Democracy and Education* (1916, p. 139), "Mere activity does not constitute experience." As I reconciled my study abroad expectations with my actual experiences, a new understanding of the potential benefits of academic exchange began to develop. I can now appreciate the Hegelian notion cited by Kolb (1984)—"Any experience that does not violate expectation is not worthy of the name experience" (p. 28)—as well as Kolb's own suggestion that it is in the "interplay between expectation and experience that learning occurs" (p. 28). Kolb rightly views the identification of gaps between expectations and reality as an important facet of experiential learning: the process of critically assessing my experiences in relation to traditional study abroad narratives, in which students develop new language skills and greater global awareness through an exhilarating and life-changing adventure, has itself been illuminative.

My foreign language studies in Copenhagen played a much more prominent role in my study abroad experience than I had initially envisioned. Attracted to the University of Copenhagen because it offered students a unique opportunity to live in a foreign language environment while taking a variety of courses in English, I enrolled in a pre-semester Danish language course, offered through the Department of Scandinavian Studies and Linguistics, with the goal of learning survival phrases. This intensive three-week course introduced me to basic Danish vocabulary and grammar and to aspects of Danish culture that spurred my desire to learn more. I subsequently enrolled in additional Danish classes, which I attended several evenings a week, and participated in a tandem language exchange program, in which I was paired with a Danish peer to practice conversational skills. These foreign language studies were central to developing an understanding of and appreciation for Danish culture. The ability to navigate simple interactions in Danish also facilitated feelings of connection and integration. As a volunteer in a student coffee shop, I consistently aimed to complete simple transactions using Danish, and felt that my efforts were appreciated. While it was necessary to switch to English when discussing complicated or abstract subject matter, simple Danish conversations created a space for new modes of understanding and intercultural exchange.

My language studies enabled me to re-examine some of the cultural patterns and biases that I have adopted as a Canadian. For example, I found that asking “How are you?” elicits very different responses from Danes. Like many other Canadians, I tend to use the phrase “How are you?” as a passing acknowledgment. The question is often answered with a single word or two—“good” or “fine”—before it is echoed back. Danes, however, seem to consider the question more sincerely and answer it in far more detail. I learned to expect a thoughtful and thorough response when I asked Danish friends or acquaintances how they were. In an attempt to better integrate myself, I made a conscious effort to use the question less flippantly; I began to employ it as a conversation starter, as Danes do, rather than as a cursory acknowledgment. I avoided asking the question of a Dane if I didn’t have time to hear the answer. Through such everyday experiences in Denmark, I developed a greater awareness of the sociocultural patterns underlying much of my interpersonal communication. Accordingly, I not only developed an appreciation for Danish communication patterns, but also arrived at a new understanding of my own Canadian identity and the ways in which my background has shaped my worldview.

Although I may have become more cognizant of such cultural norms and influences, this awareness did not itself facilitate lasting behavioural changes; upon returning to Canada, I quickly resumed more familiar patterns of communication. Indeed, the translation of my study abroad learning has proved difficult. In delineating the importance of reflection in experiential learning, Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich (2002, p. 45) rightly conclude that “any educational endeavor, including study abroad, that does not structure reflection and critical analysis of the international experience itself into the curriculum is not engaging in experiential education.” Upon returning from my study abroad, I found very few opportunities for this type of structured reflection and critical analysis. Our institution’s exchange office offered a single, one-hour reintegration session, which primarily involved students listing their favourite memories of the places they had visited. This session did very little to position study abroad as more than a fun, self-contained “add-on to the student experience” (Deane, p. 11). True experiential learning requires the incorporation of more thorough post-sojourn reflection and analysis into the

curriculum. My participation in preparing this article has offered me a semi-structured opportunity to reflect on my international study, but I recognize that this process is unusual. While it is important for students to take personal responsibility for their learning, some measure of formal post-sojourn programming would have been beneficial.

Although I have made personal efforts to apply my study abroad learning, I would have appreciated greater support during the homecoming process. As a student in McMaster's Arts and Science Program, I had a great deal of freedom to focus my academic work on subjects of particular interest to me. In my final year, I had several unique opportunities to apply my intercultural learning in an academic context, such as incorporating a case study on Danish urban planning into my undergraduate thesis on political architecture. My Danish language skills and my experiences in Copenhagen enabled me to access research materials that I might not have been able to use otherwise, and my personal involvement with the subject matter enabled me to interpret and present it in a compelling way. I was also enrolled in several inquiry courses, which typically culminate in a self-directed research project on a topic selected by the student. In a number of these courses, I developed topics that could be explored in a Danish context. Outside of these isolated academic examples, however, I have found it difficult to integrate my study abroad learning. It often seems inappropriate to draw relevant connections in social situations; among friends and classmates who have not participated in academic exchange, I worry that talking about my experiences overseas will be showy or annoying. Thus, I would have valued organized opportunities to discuss and reflect on the study abroad experience with other returning exchange students—others who, like me, would certainly benefit from guidance on translating study abroad learning into skills and ideas that are applicable across cultural contexts.

Study abroad experience II

When I accepted my offer from Amsterdam University College (AUC), I had no idea what I had signed up for, and now I still struggle to sum up my experience of study abroad. Understanding this through the lens of experiential learning, it would seem that there is a substantial gap in the process relating to reflection upon the experience of international study and reintegration into my home environment. My time in the Netherlands no doubt shaped me in many different ways. While my focus was not on language learning, as my classes were conducted entirely in English, the transition to a new academic culture, so different from the one I had known in Canada, was a key element of my experience. The attentiveness to work-life balance was striking, and it came in stark contrast to the stressful Canadian university environment I had known, even though AUC was a small, liberal arts college created as a joint venture of the city's two major universities partly to promote students' competitiveness on a global scale. The changes from familiar university structures were refreshing, but after returning home, I lacked the language and socio-cognitive tools to reflect upon and integrate my experience—in other words, to take the appropriate next steps in the experiential learning process.

The interdisciplinary nature of my prior schooling became an even more central focus during my studies abroad. In striving for “excellence and diversity,” AUC advertised its uniqueness as a centre for interdisciplinary learning.⁴ While students declare a “track”

⁴ These terms appear repeatedly on the Amsterdam University College website (<http://www.auc.nl/>), most notably in the branding “Excellence and Diversity in a Global City.”

that serves as a unifying feature, they also study broadly in the arts and sciences to provide a foundation for their work. I found myself very much at home with this kind of approach to education and, in keeping with my own background in McMaster's Arts and Science Program, took a wide selection of courses, ranging from Dutch history to neuroscience. Each of my classes was significantly smaller than those I had taken at McMaster, and we were afforded remarkable educational experiences. My Dutch history class, for example, involved several excursions in the city to explore various sites related to what we had studied; the professor and each of the ten students took on the role of guide for some portion of these trips. This kind of learning made my education in Amsterdam that much more valuable. Along with enriching my studies, the format of a small, tight-knit group allowed for a great deal of freedom in our work. Moreover, my professors were flexible with deadlines, open to modifying course plans, and generally encouraging of creativity in the classroom in a way that I saw in far fewer classes at McMaster.

The challenge with all of this was attempting to articulate it and make it useful to me upon returning to Canada. I had weeks between returning from Amsterdam and beginning a new school year at home, but time alone did not suffice to translate my experience concretely. Although a major component of experiential learning is the opportunity for reflection—as I had seen in my earlier engagement in this type of education—there was no structure in place for my reintegration into the fourth year of my interdisciplinary program. While McMaster's exchange office offered a single re-entry session at the beginning of the fall term for those returning from international studies, I avoided it, having not benefited significantly from the pre-departure sessions offered to prepare us for study abroad. Furthermore, I felt that my experience did not fit the traditional mold. Whereas the academic experience—the courses and the community of learning in which I took part—constituted the most influential part of my exchange, the discourses around study abroad suggested to me that most returnees valued their travels, the immersion in a new culture, or the personal growth that came from merely living abroad. Upon return, discussion of my experience most commonly took the form of brief conversations with friends and classmates. They would ask what I'd thought of my exchange, and the only acceptable response seemed to be to say that it was "great," an automatic reply supplemented perhaps by a few details or highlights of my time in the Netherlands. Reliance on this form of debriefing left me unable to process what had been a rich, varied, and often difficult experience; I missed out on an opportunity to think through and reflect seriously on my international exchange. In order for students like me to benefit more thoroughly from study abroad, formal and constructive settings for reflection and reintegration, as suggested in the discussion section below, are essential.

Study abroad experience III

It was once customary for aristocratic youth to embark upon a great educational adventure, the Grand Tour, in which young gentlemen travelled through the Low Countries and Germany, or France, and over the Alps to Italy in order to encounter the great cultural treasures of the Renaissance and Classical Antiquity. While the whole idea now seems impossibly elitist, perhaps there was an underlying recognition of the value of knowledge grounded in the kind of experience accessible to those who could venture beyond the bounds of the familiar. In the weeks leading to my departure for the University of Copenhagen, my father, our family's consummate historian, could not help but remind me

that the next six months would be a chance for a Grand Tour of my own. His suggestion was laced with sarcasm, but even so I could not stop myself from indulging in a few delusions of grandeur. This would be my chance to play the role of a modern peer of the realm, striding into an unfamiliar yet acquiescent world. Sadly, the Grand Tour illusion quickly dissolved; I was a twenty-year-old university student, much like any other. True, I was in a program that championed experiential learning and had already stretched my personal and intellectual boundaries rather far for a person my age, or so at least I thought. At the same time, I had enough humility to accept that I still lacked insight into the realities of life. I was not what you would call naive, but I did sometimes struggle to drop my preconceptions in the face of something new or uncomfortable. Doubts and fears troubled me as I packed my bags for the coming journey. Would I manage to adapt? When the time finally came, and I found myself standing on European soil, wondering what to do next, I tacitly recognized that Copenhagen did not have to be a daunting labyrinth or a place of isolation. The entire city could become a kind of classroom: I could immerse myself in local life, and the hours spent off-campus could be as crucial to my learning as any professorial instruction or tutorial debate.

The international exchange certainly proved educational. Although I had a set program of study, which included philosophy and architecture courses, I seized the opportunity to change my major and decided to become a linguist. At first, that meant learning a new language in a literal sense, as in the first month of the residence abroad, I was enrolled in an intensive Danish course. But the more powerful lessons came from an unorthodox source: the simple, everyday business of life is what I look back on now as the heart and soul of my linguistic study. A trip to the grocery store, when a struggle to decipher the Danish labels turned into an etymology lesson. A ride through the centre of Copenhagen, where a violation of the city's bicycle etiquette could garner an irate bell ring from a fellow cyclist. A late night wait for the homebound train, when a public bench became a front-row seat to a vibrant parade of characters. Such snapshots may seem trivial; they are the sort of banal memories commonly shared by tourists returning from a holiday. These recollections have a permanency for me, however, because they represent the grammar of an unspoken language. They are the system of behaviours, protocols, and values that constitute the vernacular of everyday Danish life.

My lessons in this new language helped me to see that the unfamiliar does not have to be alien. As I interacted with the local inhabitants as well as with other international students, assumptions of difference gave way to an appreciation of shared experience. This is not to suggest that we all fully empathized with one another, for each Dane or international visitor brought unique experiences to share, and no amount of laughter or banter could supplant a precious sense of individuality. Nonetheless, any latent uncertainties from my perspective began to evaporate when our diverse array of experiences intermingled, forging some common ground. Indeed, my study of the implicit language of Danish life has made the prospect of jumping into similar situations far less intimidating; the constructive discomforts of international schooling convinced me of my own capabilities and my capacity to thrive in an intercultural environment.⁵ Such confidence is of the utmost importance if experiential learning is to be a lifelong process, for this kind of learning depends upon students having not only the curiosity, but also the

⁵ This student's experience of language acquisition, broadly conceived, accords with research findings in Kinginger (2009).

courage to pursue it of their own accord. If I had to identify one life-changing effect of my time in Denmark, it would be that I learned to take risks, steps large and small, and come out better for it. I now have the mindset to further my education in a meaningful way, whether or not my studies take me abroad again. Having relinquished the notion of experiential learning as any kind of neatly contoured Grand Tour, and resisting the complacencies offered by English-language environments, at home or abroad, both of which offer settings for intercultural activity, I am interested in continuing my journey as a self-proclaimed linguist. As I embark on a graduate degree in global affairs, specific opportunities for further international education are beginning to come into focus. Beyond the naturally outward reach of the academic program, I can envision an internship or another chance to study abroad, or perhaps both, and approach these possibilities with a greater awareness of the benefits of reserving judgment when encountering the unfamiliar and remaining open to new forms of cultural expression throughout the experience.

Study abroad experience IV

I would describe my international study at the University of Copenhagen as transformative insofar as it endowed me with a renewed energy and perspective. The opportunity to immerse myself in a foreign culture was my foremost reason for wanting to spend a term abroad; it was a new and different learning experience that I craved. Since I had attended a local university, exchange was to serve as my big moment, my opportunity to free myself from all the comforts and familiarities of home. The common notion that we can only grow through discomfort and challenge was certainly confirmed by my experiences. Unlike the warm welcome I received in first year at McMaster, the reception in Copenhagen was rather bleak; upon arrival, I was left to my own devices, forced to navigate the city and find my way to the residence. When I finally arrived, I found that the building was empty, isolated, and dark. It was the middle of Scandinavian winter and, after the sun went down at 3:30 pm, I found myself alone in a small single room, unable to connect to the Internet, and at a loss when I tried to lock the door. Those first few hours were probably the loneliest I have experienced, not knowing where I was and questioning my decision to travel far away from everything I knew. That night, cold, tired, and confused, I went to sleep without dinner and with a chair wedged against the door. The next day I awoke feeling renewed, still frightened by the reality of being alone in a strange place, but keen to figure things out, explore the city, and contend with the situation in which I found myself. Throughout my study abroad, I often found myself in difficult circumstances and had no choice but to harness my own personal strength and figure out how to keep moving forward and take the next best step. While my international experiences were very much informed by the people I met and places I saw, the most valuable things I learned were about my own capacities. Each small challenge I faced did not necessarily transform me, but it did allow me the opportunity to uncover parts of myself with which I was not so familiar; I emerged feeling stronger than before, and with a greater self-awareness.

Much of what I learned during my time abroad did not involve second-language acquisition in a conventional sense, but increased knowledge of languages did manifest itself in the form of new interdisciplinary practices and understandings. However, despite all that I had learned, I found that upon my return to Canada, I lacked meaningful outlets or ways of integrating my experience abroad with my life at home. Although I had felt ready to leave Copenhagen, I found that the switch to familiar Canadian life occurred

quickly, without any transition period in which I could seriously reflect on my experiences and understand the ways in which they might have changed me and altered my perspectives. Instead, I felt as if my study abroad was pushed to the periphery; it became a blink in time, a stand-alone moment not fully incorporated into my everyday life. This stratification only intensified as school began, when friends asked how exchange had been—a question I found myself struggling to answer honestly. The rote “It was great!” appeared to be a satisfactory response, consistent with the common view of study abroad as “a glorified vacation” (Passerelli & Kolb, 2012, p. 137). While in many ways it was a fascinating sojourn, not every moment was easy, full of adventure, or enjoyable. When relating my experiences to friends and family, I felt the pressure to make my stories conform to their grandiose visions of what they imagined study abroad to be like, and while I did have many wonderful anecdotes to share, I often found myself simplifying my experience for the sake of easy conversation. Although it might have been difficult for me to translate my experience to others, I now regret that I was never really presented with—nor did I seek out—the opportunity to try. The independence I had gained while abroad diminished as I fell back into old routines and habits; while I felt changed on the inside, it was almost as if the person I had become could only exist among the unfamiliar.

Study abroad experience V

My program at McMaster exposed me to a variety of pedagogical practices, including those of experiential education. Study abroad allowed me to continue my interdisciplinary learning, while discovering more about my heritage (my mother was born and raised in the Netherlands) and strengthening my Dutch language skills. With the objective of cultural immersion, I enrolled in courses in Dutch language and culture at the University of Amsterdam that contributed to my learning experience in ways both expected and surprising. For example, assignments in the Dutch language course that required us to go out into the city and engage in conversation with its Dutch-speaking inhabitants allowed us not only to practice our Dutch language skills, but also to interact with the wider community and learn more about societal values. One cultural phenomenon that I found particularly interesting relates to academic ambition: in the Dutch “zesjes cultuur,” or a “culture of sixes,” students need not aspire to outperform their peers, for a six (the minimum grade constituting a pass) is sufficient to warrant success.⁶ Although individual accomplishments are celebrated in the Netherlands, educators rarely assign grades higher than an eight out of ten. This educational system, in which no student stands above others, has helped to create a culture that is less career-driven and individualistic than that of North American society. Since I was not only gaining knowledge in an academic setting, but also making discoveries outside the classroom, I could reflect more deeply on the relevance to my life of what I was learning.

Engaging with the material on such a personal level enabled me to evaluate and adopt certain principles as my own, which I hoped to carry with me into my fourth and final year of studies. I had gained a deeper understanding of the importance of cultural and personal traditions, as well as the power of being able to communicate with others in their

⁶ While the expression “D is for Degree” might suggest a similar culture in some Canadian institutions, an analysis of the Dutch pass-fail grading system shows that it gives students little incentive to pursue higher marks (Holleman, 2010). Whereas a D-minus average in Canada clearly reflects poor academic performance, in the Netherlands it would be considered satisfactory and indicative of academic success.

native tongue. Upon returning to Canada, however, I found it difficult to incorporate these learnings into my lifestyle at home. Although I felt that I had grown and changed, my family and friends treated me as though I were the same person who had left eight months earlier. Furthermore, as it was our graduating year, my peers were busy applying to graduate programs or professional schools and making important decisions about their futures, and I was soon swept up in the rush. Unable to reconcile the values to which I had been exposed abroad with the environment I was re-entering, I found myself reverting to pre-exchange behaviours. It also proved difficult to maintain the progress I had made in the Dutch language, as I was no longer in an environment conducive to its use and practice. Eventually, however, my own continual reflection on the principles I had valued while studying in the Netherlands, helped me come to terms with the stresses of fourth year, and I realized that I was rushing into important decisions. Instead of unthinkingly applying to graduate programs, I was able to step back and recognize that taking some time to explore my options would be for the better. I would not have been able to come to this decision had it not been for my exposure to a less individualistic society and had I not faced situations there that had forced me outside of my comfort zone. I am fortunate in having been able to return to the Netherlands for the holidays at the end of the year. Doing so presented me with an opportunity to reaffirm the principles that I had valued while on exchange. It also motivated me to maintain my Dutch language skills, and I was able to write my Dutch as a Second Language exam in order to become formally bilingual. However, such opportunities are not available to everyone, and a variety of methods must be developed to assist students in continuing to find meaning in their exchange experiences even after returning home.

Discussion: Interdisciplinary and experiential study abroad programming

All five of the student authors certainly valued their study abroad experiences and found them educational. They report having grown in confidence and self-awareness, and having developed new mindsets and intercultural communication skills as they navigated the unfamiliar languages and cultures of their host countries. Upon returning from their respective international sojourns, however, the students had difficulty finding a place in their academic and personal lives for substantial reflection and critical analysis of their experiences. One contributor notes that she feared being perceived as “showy” or “annoying,” and thus refrained from drawing connections or translating her learning as she might otherwise have been prompted to do, choosing instead to minimize her study abroad narrative. Indeed, the students often struggled to share their experience of international study with friends and family in any meaningful way. Feeling pressured to conform to the traditional study abroad narrative of exhilarating adventure, they found themselves resorting to drastically oversimplified, sometimes merely sentence-long accounts of their exchange. The debriefing offered by the exchange office’s re-entry session at our institution, which seemed to invite the simple recounting of memories, failed to do justice to the complexity and genuinely transformative nature of the students’ rich and varied international sojourns; it served to reinforce rather than disrupt conventional expectations. Furthermore, the return to familiar social structures and communicative practices made it difficult to uphold newly developed values, ideals, and even senses of self. In their home environment, instead of being positioned to experience fresh forms of what one author terms “the constructive discomforts” of intercultural encounters, the students found

themselves “swept up,” as another contributor puts it, in all-too-familiar preoccupations and anxieties.

The five student authors make a strong case for the institutional provision of formal, structured opportunities to share and process study abroad experiences. Although on an individual level they made efforts to apply their learning—some efforts at integration more successful than others—rather than rely on “haphazard” or “chance” personal initiative, as Plews et al. (2014, p. 71) articulate the problem, universities and colleges could be tasked with supporting study abroad experiential learning in the form of programming that facilitates “intentional engagement”: “planned, guided, and critically reflective” (Plews et al., pp. 71-72). Such programming would necessarily engage students on a more thoughtful level than the preparatory and reintegration sessions described above serve to do. In particular, the development of a rigorous, interdisciplinary post-sojourn program would ensure that students have the means truly to bring their international learning home. Ideally, such programming would be integrated into a range of community-building events, supported by offices such as International Affairs and Experiential Education (or their institutional equivalents) as well as by the various Faculties, but coordinated at the departmental or program level, to guard against the superficialities of an overly bureaucratized system. Extended, guided, weekly or biweekly opportunities for discussion throughout the year, involving participants from three main groups—students returning from study abroad, those from elsewhere newly arrived to study in Canada, and those from the home institution without study abroad experience—would offer a valuable forum for inquiry into all manner of relevant issues, whether of personal or public concern. In addition, a program to match students returning from international study with those newly arrived from elsewhere and those contemplating or planning to embark on academic exchange has the potential to complicate and enhance intercultural learning as well as to enrich institutional internationalizing initiatives.

Individual courses provide further opportunity for engaging in the reflective and integrative work so crucial to experiential and interdisciplinary learning. It is telling that the present study was conceived in a Comparative Literature course, as its six co-authors, along with other class participants, worked together to make sense of Homer’s *Odyssey*. In that same Literature class, study of German author Margot Schroeder’s “Mir geht es gut,” translated as “I’m Doing Fine” (1986), lends itself well to reflection on discursive confinements and freedoms relevant both to those returning from study abroad and to those who have remained at home (as well as, potentially, students from elsewhere who have come to study in Canada). Discussions of the poem enable on one level the critical exploration of issues in social interaction raised, for example, by the Danish responses described above to the conventional North American greeting, “How are you?” Students might also, however, consider problems encountered by those feeling compelled to answer “It was great!” in response to the customary question of how one’s study abroad experience had been. The class might also explore the issue of who is assumed to have undergone an experience worth asking about, those returning from exchange, those coming to Canada for international study, or those who have not left home. The poem, whose very title constitutes a conventional reply to an implied question, problematizes such rote responses and prompts readers to contextualize their intercultural experience, whether they have studied abroad or not, and apply their insights to present or future challenges.

While the temptation in post-sojourn reflection may be to focus on past experiences, the potential for critical examination of such matters as the value of risk-taking, the power dynamics involved in the development of trust and intimacy, or the ethics and politics of internationalization itself could prove meaningful for all participants as they make choices about careers and future directions. To ground study abroad programming, we envision a mandatory inquiry course, attached to the exchange experience, coordinated at the departmental or program level, and requiring on-going participation before, during, and after international study. Students would be tasked with conceiving an interdisciplinary project of particular interest to them, which they would pursue through research and experience while abroad, but would continue to develop upon their return. Far beyond an informal reflective exercise or the simple thinking about or sharing of memories and feelings, such a course would structure reflection and encourage students to examine their experience through a critical lens by requiring a substantial research paper, which would be presented at a public forum at the home institution, to an audience consisting of other international exchange participants (those returning, those considering or about to embark on study abroad, those from elsewhere) as well as any students, faculty, and staff committed to furthering, “with integrity” (Deane, 2011), the process of internationalization.

Conclusion

There is considerable potential for more meaningful study abroad programming, especially with regard to post-sojourn opportunities. The single reintegration session currently offered at our institution, for instance, only reinforces ideas of academic exchange as an isolated experience. As outlined above, we envision an after study abroad culture that would, on the contrary, enable students returning to Canada to continue their experiential journey in ways that might prove transformative not only for the travelers, as they bring their learning home, but also to some extent for those to whom they are returning, for those arriving from elsewhere, and even for the institution. The development of such an environment would arise from a more intentional and rigorous framing of study abroad programming as experiential learning, which would acknowledge the ongoing nature of the reflective process and facilitate the involvement of a multiplicity of actors: not only those, like Odysseus, who have journeyed far and wide, but also those, such as Penelope, Telemachus, and countless others, who may be no less invested in the challenges and rewards of a successful homecoming.

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