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## An Examination of Students Perceptions of "Learning" in a Study Abroad Experience and Recommendations for Effective Pedagogy

Scott Dickmeyer  
Ronda Knox

### Abstract

Undergraduate study abroad programs are becoming more popular in our increasingly global society. Students consider the opportunity to study abroad to be a personally impacting educational experience. This study provided empirical data demonstrating that study abroad experiences are unique as students learn in ways that differ from the tradition classroom. Additionally, the results indicate that students struggle with the interdependent terms study and abroad. The experience of living abroad is exceptionally educational as well deeply personal and impacting. However, traditional classroom study practices (reading textbooks, taking exams, etc.) impose obstacles for the experiential learning (living in another culture). As such, more instructional communication scholarship is needed to understand the unique pedagogical act of studying abroad. Ultimately, this research posits that creative pedagogy may provide students a more educational and impacting study abroad experience.

### Introduction

*Ireland has put a new meaning into learning. Being a student here has put me in a mode where I always want to be learning. From traveling to meeting people, I have learned more that any book could ever convey.*

Jenny (fictional name)

One of the most unique and personally impacting collegiate educational experiences occurs when one studies abroad. Studying abroad is important as we live in an age of globalization where international borders are no longer boundaries and students must be prepared to navigate our multicultural world. The justification for studying abroad is obvious—it is the only curriculum that makes perfect sense (Marcum & Roochnik, 2001). It is not surprising that students are taking advantage of study abroad opportunities. In fact, the number of students studying abroad tripled during the later part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Marklein, 2003). The Institute of International Education reports that over 154,000 U.S. college students studied abroad during the 2000-2001 academic year (Witherell, 2002). While more students are taking advantage of the study abroad experience, instructional communication scholars have yet to consider this unique pedagogical phenomenon a significant topic for research.

Dixon-Shaver and Shaver (1995) demonstrate the intersubjective nature of communication and culture claiming, the "production, maintenance, and interpretation of culture is communication and communication is culture" (p. 2).

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While instructors can profess that culture and communication are interconnected and co-constituted phenomena, students need direct experience to truly understand the phenomenon. However, providing a structured learning experience calls for effective pedagogical decisions by instructors, many of whom have not taught abroad and are unaware of the impact of study-abroad experiences. The best way to understand the impact of *study* (knowledge acquisition) *abroad* (in a new culture) *experiences* (while facing new opportunities and challenges) is an empirical investigation of actual student perceptions while studying abroad.

### Review of Literature

The study abroad experience is a unique and impacting educational occurrence as a student's experience involves immersion in another culture. The immersion experience is different than the traditional lecture/discussion format student's experience in American universities. The impact of an immersion-based educational experience should be understood through an instructional communication perspective.

Instructional communication has been examined from a variety of perspectives that demonstrate the phenomenon of pedagogy in American classrooms. Numerous variables have been studied in communication education. Some examples of teacher behaviors include, affinity seeking (Frymier, 1994; Frymier & Thompspon, 1992; Gorham, Kelley, & McCroskey, 1989), teacher clarity (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998), immediacy behaviors (Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Richmond, 1990), dress (Gorham, Stanely, & Morris, 1999) and verbal aggression (Myers & Knox, 2000; Myers & Knox, 1999).

Student motivation (Dobos, 1996; Kerssen-Griep, 2001; Myers, 2002; Schrodt, Wheelless, & Ptacek, 2000) and student learning (Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999) have also been extensively examined. Two other areas of instructional communication that have received recent attention are computer-mediated communication in the classroom (Lane & Shelton, 2001; LaRose & Whitten, 2000) and the scholarship of teaching and learning (McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2002). However, very few communication scholars have examined teaching and learning in a study abroad experience. The following review will examine literature on study abroad and experiential learning.

### Study Abroad

Scant attention has been given to study abroad from a communication perspective. Martin (1989) developed a pre-departure course for students to learn skills to be successful while studying abroad. She argued the course should be similar to other skills-type communication courses, such as public speaking and small group communication. The goal of a pre-departure orientation is to help students prepare for their intercultural experience. Martin (1989) posited that mainstream academic courses do not prepare students to be successful in a new cultural environment. She argued that realistic expectations would help students become more successful while studying abroad. Martin's (1989) proposal for a Speaker and Gavel, Vol 43 (2006)

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pre-departure course included suggestions for course content. Two of the objectives for the course are uniquely communicative in nature, “first, to give students a conceptual framework for understanding intercultural interactions; second, to assist in developing strategies for effective intercultural adjustment and interaction” (Martin, 1989, p. 250).

A reentry course has also been proposed from an intercultural communication perspective (Koester, 1984). The purpose of this course was to have students examine their experiences upon their return from studying abroad. Course objectives included: “to study the interpersonal communication process during the intercultural reentry” and “to understand the impact of the intercultural experience on interpersonal communication” (Koester, 1984, p. 253). Martin (1986) also studied the role of communication in students’ reentry into the United States. She contends that teachers need to examine students’ study abroad experiences from a communication perspective. Martin (1986) found that study abroad students perceived positive and negative changes in their relationships with their parents, siblings, and friends when they returned from their study abroad experience. This review of instructional communication research shows that the need for more currently and basic research that focuses on students’ lived-experience of studying abroad.

While there is little research from an instructional communication perspective, study abroad scholarship generally demonstrates a positive impact on students. For example, while immersed in a different culture, American students typically report higher levels of change in their attitudes toward the host country, the United States, and in their perceptions of themselves and their lives (Carlson, Burn, Useem, & Yachimowicz, 1990). Additionally, studying abroad increases American students’ foreign language skills, allows students to grow interpersonally, and gives students an opportunity to be more independent and develop more tolerant views (Limburg-Weber, 2000). Juhasz and Walker (1988) found that students who studied abroad reported lower self-esteem and self-efficacy scores than students who did not study abroad, but argued that this was indeed a positive outcome. They posited that these lower scores indicated that study abroad students were more mature and that they viewed themselves more objectively.

Gallant (2002) interviewed study abroad students and wrote a book to guide future study abroad students. According to Gallant (2002), the study abroad experience was difficult for students to explain, “for many students, the experience is so positive in so many ways that they can’t even begin to put it into words” (p. 2). Students were, however, quite able to give practical advice for those studying abroad, ranging from budgeting resources to dealing with being an American in a foreign country. Armstrong (1984) also stated that upon their return, study abroad students had difficulty singling out a positive experience. Instead, there were themes of positive outcomes, including “1) change in self-perception, 2) change in perceptions of others, 3) opportunities to gain language fluency, 4) opportunity to experience living abroad (Armstrong, 1984, p. 3).

Few negative experiences are reported in study abroad research. Wilkinson (2000) argued that when studies are not statistically significant, researchers tend

to blame the measures used rather than consider the experience. Based on her case study, contrasts were found between study abroad students’ expectations and their actual experiences. Those contrasts were cross-cultural misunderstandings, less than optimal host family situations, and unimpressive linguistic progress (Wilkinson, 2000).

Study abroad instructors have also made curricular suggestions based on their teaching experiences abroad. For example, Talburt and Stewart (1999) found weekly papers describing students’ cultural observations could be used in class discussions to help students’ process and reflect on their experiences while studying abroad. Early in their study abroad experience, students were confused by daily interaction and the course helped “make sense of their experiences” (Talburt & Stewart, 1999, p. 167). However, when trying to make sense of another culture, American students tended to use the United States as their lens for reflection.

Kauffmann, Martin, and Weaver (1992) stated that research conducted on the study abroad experience has been inconclusive because of research methodologies. They contend that study abroad researchers miss important data by not interviewing students about their experiences. Based on an analysis of 41 study abroad research articles, students reported less personal growth and development when taking quantitative measures than with qualitative measures (Kauffmann et al., 1992). Therefore, personal one-on-one interviews may provide a deeper understanding of the study abroad experience. Katula and Threnhauser (1999) ask, “how does the student reflect upon the experience?” (p. 247). Reflection is an important component in the study abroad experience. It makes sense that reflection may be an important component of studying abroad because it is a unique experiential learning situation.

### Experiential Learning

Experiential learning attempts to provide concrete examples and experiences outside of the classroom. Study abroad can be considered a form of experiential learning. Experiential learning has been defined as immersing students in a learning experience and reflecting about those experiences “to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking” (Lewis & Williams, 1994, p. 5). Katula and Threnhauser (1999) state that we have an unquestioned assumption that studying abroad is an inherently enriching experience. However, they question how students perceive the study abroad as an experiential learning experience.

Bardhan (2003) posits that public relations students needed more of an international perspective in their undergraduate curriculum. When students were asked what influenced their decisions to participate in extra-curricular activities outside of the classroom, life experiences dominated. However, a majority of the students reported growing up in homogeneous communities and tended to have an ethnocentric perception of America. In addition, Bardhan (2003) found students wanted to participate in experiential learning in the form of studying abroad and exchange programs. In other words, by studying abroad, students would gain the experiential education they desire.

Because students are immersed in another culture 24 hours a day, experiential learning can take place not only in the classroom abroad, but also in everyday interactions. Hopkins (1999) argues that students not only learn about another culture, but also about themselves. "When students go abroad, they inevitably find themselves looking inward as well as outward, reconciling their views of themselves and their cultural assumptions with the new cultural context" (Hopkins, 1999, ¶ 4). Hopkins (1999) also states that study abroad students are the best source for explaining the value of studying abroad as experiential learning. Berge (1999) contends that education is more inquiry-based than in the past. As a result, students are becoming more self-directed, taking responsibility for their own learning.

This literature review demonstrates that the aboard experience may be an exceptional, eye opening, experiential learning opportunity for students. While scholarship demonstrates the benefits of studying abroad, too little is known about the lived-experience. In order to enhance the pedagogical decisions of study abroad instructors, the following question guides our research project:

**RQ1:** How do students describe the experiential learning that occurs in a study abroad experience?

### Methods

This research was designed to produce an ethnographic account of students' experiences while studying abroad. As such, the goal was to provide a voice for students' unique experiences of the learning that takes place both in the classroom and by living in a foreign environment. The researchers' engaged in data collection procedures designed to empower research participants. The diary:diary-interview placed participants in the role of co-inquirers and recapitulated the basic structure of most ethnography (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977). The focus group interview provided an opportunity for participants to present their experiences and expand their ideas by building off of the descriptions of other participants (Herdon, 1993). These data collection procedures decreased researcher bias and provided the participants maximum opportunities to engage as co-inquirers as they determined the content of the interview based on the experiences they wrote about their diaries.

### Participants

In order to be considered a participant in this study, one needed to provide data while immersed in a study abroad experience. Therefore, the researchers employed a convenience sampling of university students engaged in the same study abroad program. Seventeen females (age 20-26) participated in this study. All of the participants were part of a four-week study abroad program in Ireland that was sanctioned and facilitated by a mid-sized midwestern university. All seventeen participants completed the requirements for participation (maintaining a diary and participated in individual diary-based interviews). Six of the participants were involved in a focus group interview six months after returning from their study abroad.

### Data Collection

The data for this study were collected in three separate, but interrelated phases. The first phase involved study abroad participants providing "in the moment" descriptions their experiences. Participants were given a diary and asked to reflect on their experiences as university students studying abroad. Additionally, Participants were asked to offer several examples of experiences that applied to the content of their reflections. On four occasions participants were given class time to write responses to direct questions from the researchers.

The second part of data collection was the diary interview. The researchers read each participant's journal entries in order to determine questions that would be asked of that particular individual during her interview. The researchers' questions were based on pertinent, unexpected, or vehement diary entries that appeared to demonstrate the depth and breadth of the lived experience of studying abroad. The interview questions were designed to encourage participants to describe their experiences in honest and illuminating ways that provided deep and rich descriptions. Since each interview was based on the diary of the individual being interviewed, the questions were different for each interviewee. The individual interviews were audio taped, the responses were transcribed, and the data analyzed.

The third phase of data collection was a focus group interview with six participants and was conducted six months after the participants completed their study abroad experience. The purpose of the focus group interview was three-fold. First, the researchers felt that it was important to provide participants an opportunity to act as a "check" on their analysis of the study abroad experience. This "check" was important as it insured that this reported results accurately represented of the participants' experiences. Second, while "in the moment" descriptions were accurate representations of individual's immediate responses to experiences, they may not have been accurate representations of the impact of specific instances to the whole of a lived-experience. Therefore, the focus group interview provided participants an opportunity to reflect on the whole study abroad experience, discuss it, add to or contradict the responses of others, and clarify what they had described in their journal entries and interview responses. Finally, the focus group interview provided participants an opportunity to provide deeper and richer descriptions of their study abroad experiences. The focus group interview was audio taped, the responses were transcribed, and the data analyzed. Table 1 provides a graphic representation summarizing the data collection procedures.

**Table 1: Summary of Data Collection Procedures***Journal Entries (231 pages)*

Students were asked to make journal entries each week in Ireland.

*Interviews (17 subjects)*

The diary: diary-interview process was used.

Journal entries were used to create interview questions.

Each interview was 20-30 minutes in length.

*Post Ireland Focus Group (6 subjects)*

Focus group data were transcribed.

**Data Analysis**

The researchers employed Straus and Corbin's (1990) constant comparative analysis, this method allowed results to surface through three stages. The constant comparative method engaged the researcher in a continuous back and forth process considering individual pieces of data and the whole text of collected data. Kvale (1996) compared the constant comparative process to a spiral, with a continuously deepening understanding of meaning. The constant comparative method of analysis involved three levels of coding: open, axial, and selective. In open coding phenomena were labeled, categories discovered, developed, and named according to their properties and dimensions. Axial coding involved a set of procedures whereby data were put back together in new ways after open coding, making connections between categories. Axial coding insured that the researchers engaged in comparing interpretations of single statements and the global meaning of the study (Kvale, 1996). Selective coding involved a process of choosing the core category—the central phenomenon around which all the other categories were integrated (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The data analysis for this study followed three specific steps. First, at the completion of the individual diary-based interviews, the researchers read all the diary entries and the interview transcripts as a single whole text. This reading of the data as a single text allowed the researchers to gain a global understanding of the participants study abroad experience. The second step involved each researcher returning to the journal entries and interview responses and identifying instances that demonstrated participant's claims of learning experiences while studying abroad. Each learning message was given a label. Repetitious messages and those containing similar meaning were collapsed together under a single label, clarifying the central meanings of the learning messages. The third step involved examining labeled messages, identifying conceptual relationships between them, and through a comparison/contrast analysis, creating mutually exclusive categories. These categories were then compared to the whole text of journal entries and interview responses to insure the categories accurately represented the lived experiences reported in participants' journal entries. The mutually exclusive categories were the basis for questions used during the focus group interview creating a check on the researchers' analysis, insuring an accurate representation of the study abroad students experiences. As a result of the focus group interview, one of the categories (the importance of building rela-

tionships with travel companions) was eliminated from the results. Participants claimed that they wrote about that issue in the here-and-now experience of studying abroad, but after reflecting on their experiences as a whole, it was not representative. The remaining five categories comprise the results of this study.

**Results**

The results presented here emerged as categories during the open and axial coding phases of the constant comparative analysis. These categories worded as declarative statements about the study abroad experience, represent how participants experienced learning while studying abroad and answer the research question that grounds this project. Table two identifies the categories that emerged in this study.

**Table Two: Emergent Categories of Study Abroad Experiences**

1. My eyes were opened in so many ways!
2. This is exactly what I expected only very different than anything I ever expected
3. At times I felt out of control
4. You just can't learn this kind of stuff in a classroom!
5. I learned so much about myself

The emergent categories, described individually, were mutually exclusive and significant in that they provided the greatest insight into the experiences of the study abroad students. In order to demonstrate the personal flavor of participants' experiences, yet maintain confidentiality, every account has been provided a fictional name. The phrase used most often to describe the myriad of situations that constituted "learning" during the study abroad experience was "my eyes were opened." Therefore, the first category described in these results was phrased to demonstrate participants' words.

**My eyes were opened in so many ways!**

Examples of culture shock were plentiful in the early journal entries of participants. The most prominent examples of culture shock in both the diary entries and focus group responses had to do with the basic human needs. Participants were shocked by the differences they experienced in types of food, service in restaurants, and having to pay for using restrooms (which were not plentiful). More dramatic and impacting differences experienced by the study abroad group were anti-American sentiments and the laidback attitude of the Irish. Wanda's diary entry describes the experiences of several participants: "The anti-American sentiment doesn't make me feel good. I don't want to stand out anymore. I'm ready to go home. I miss my family, Diet Dr. Pepper, my cell phone, ranch dressing and condiments you don't have to pay for." Condiments were a popular topic in the focus group interview. Several participants' claimed that in order to adjust to the food, they turned to condiments and found a new problem, "you have to pay for it!"(Jill). To counteract what Wanda called the "condiment conspiracy," participants devised strategies in order to keep for paying for

ketchup. Since Monica carried a backpack wherever she went, Jill convinced her to keep a bottle of American ketchup in it for "restaurant emergencies." While study abroad participants were able to plan and strategize ways to decrease the inconvenience of a lack of public facilities or having to pay for products that make ones' food taste better, they found it more difficult to interact with people who were more laidback and those who expressed anti-American attitudes. Every participant in the study identified having their eyes opened by observing differences in the lifestyle and attitudes of the Irish and Europeans.

An early experience of culture shock occurred as participants began to recognize the differences in American and Irish perspectives on time. As Sally put it:

Compared to the States, people weren't in a rush here. Time wasn't as important, not needing to be on time. You felt relaxed being in this culture. They say we don't have the time and we work more. They're more late, which isn't always a good thing.

While it was frustrating to wait for service, participants were much more adamant about their experiences with people being rude and having anti-American attitudes. Jennifer wrote in her diary about becoming intimately aware of the fact that there are people in this world who do not see America or Americans in a positive light, "It makes me feel not good about myself and my country. The lighter in my face was scary—didn't like that. We are generalized. The world isn't happy with the war and people think we are for it." Pam described becoming aware of the assumptions made about Americans:

It makes me feel sad and embarrassed. Even though I don't like George Bush, I still love being American. It is the loud Americans they remember. The comments about Bush don't bother me, but I didn't like that we didn't vote him in and it isn't really a democracy. The "fat Americans" comment, I felt bad because of being with large people who might think they are fat.

The study abroad participants eyes were opened in many ways. For several of the students the Ireland experience was an opportunity to encounter a culture that was drastically different than the one they grew up in. While many had traveled extensively within the United States, their travel was to generally "touristy" locales where they were not really exposed to the day-to-day differences in life styles, approaches to communication and attitudes.

**This is exactly what I expected only very different than anything I ever expected**

One of the dichotomies that emerged from participants' diary entries and responses during the focus group interview concerned what participants expected to experience and their actual experiences. Several participants wrote about how much they enjoyed seeing the Ireland that they expected to see.

The experiences that matched expectations were generally seen as positive and affirming. For example, Donna claimed, "Today we went to Clifden and it was beautiful. It was what I had pictured Ireland to be like. Today, I saw what I really wanted to see." Participants also claimed that experiencing "traditional" Irish activities and food was comforting. Denise describes a rewarding outing in which participants experienced several of the Irish traditions:

Last night was the first time I had a blast in Galway. All of us went out for fish and chips and then to Monroe's bar. There was Irish dancing with traditional Irish music, which I thought was pretty entertaining.

While participants described a comfort when their experiences matched their expectations several claimed that they felt that such experiences lacked the depth of those that were unexpected and made them feel uncomfortable.

As previously described, one of the unexpected experiences was meeting with anti-American attitudes in Ireland and found in travels to other European countries. The participants were occasionally threatened, called warmongers, and told that Americans were all spoiled brats who got everything they wanted. While these bold anti-American encounters were not the norm, participants quickly learned that attitudes were different in Ireland than in the Midwestern American communities where these students were raised. Several participants expected the Irish to be friendly and accommodating, yet found that this attitude was not always present. Emily wrote about being surprised by the "real" Irish attitude:

Before I left, everyone kept telling me, you're going to love it over there, the Irish are very friendly, very nice. When I got over there, no one stood out as being overly nice. The wait staff in restaurants ignored you, shopkeepers were not friendly unless you were buying something, and there was the whole Irish lie thing.

While participants noticed the differences in attitude, service, and helping tourists, they usually finished their journal entries or interview answers with a statement about how they had come to see the Irish as friendly, but in a different way than the Midwestern, America standards they knew. One of the interesting subjects that kept coming up in journal entries was "the Irish lie." The "lie" was mentioned often, but never elaborated on in journal accounts. While the "lie" was always written about as a negative, it was described in the post-Ireland focus group interview as a highlight of the study abroad experience—an opportunity to learn about another culture.

During the focus group interview, one participant even claimed that she knew that she understood the culture when she was capable of getting by with a lie told to a "master of the Irish lie." Participants learned to cope with differences in the Irish culture by creating strategies and learning to interpret messages more carefully. They were proud of these coping mechanisms. According

to participants the most impacting learning though occurred when participants dealt with situations in which they felt “out of control.”

### **At times I felt out of control**

The experiences involving feelings of being out of control comprise the most painful, but meaningful learning reported by study abroad participants. Diary entries, interview responses, and focus group interview discussions were most fervent when participants described experiences where they felt out of control. Some of these experiences were preventable, such as finding oneself out of money and not knowing where to find an ATM to get cash. However, experiences such as having their apartment broken into on two occasions were not in the participants’ control. The participants felt it was quite important to describe these experiences and what they learned from them. Participants generally described that they had learned a great deal about themselves by their ability to survive experiences.

The most dramatic example of participants feeling out of control was a break in that occurred in Corrib Village. Several diary entries described the break in, but Karin’s own story came out in the focus group interview,

I was in the shower and some dude crawled in my window and stole my purse. And it was especially bad because I just got back from a trip and all my stuff was in my purse, so my passport, credit cards all forms of ID and my money. I realized it was gone and I went outside and looked outside and looked all around and realized I hadn’t misplaced it and so I started freaking out. I was mad at myself that I must have put it somewhere or left it in the bus. And when I came back in I realized my window was completely open—all the way open. And I never would have climbed on my desk and opened it. That was my worst out of control story. I was worried about not having any money. I’m screwed, I have two weeks left in Ireland, I have no money, no ID, there is nothing I can do.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect to Karin’s story, during the focus group interview was the conversation that followed. One of the participants responded to her story by reminding her that even though she felt that she was “screwed, with two weeks to go,” she got through it. Karin responded that while she never wanted to have to go through that experience again, she learned that she could handle challenges greater than she had ever dreamed. Karin felt that her ability to overcome the challenges brought on by the theft made her more confident and capable.

If conditions were bad when they got to Corrib Village, it got worse when they returned from a short trip. Jennifer wrote in her diary,

Turns out some other crazies broke into our apartment and partied, then left. Not surprised! The fact that people just broke in and partied, then left was weird. Oh well, Corrib Village, to put it quite frankly, sucks. Service wise as well as safety wise. It really sucks. I felt insecure with the place we were

living, but didn’t think we needed to lock up items in the kitchen. Corrib Village doesn’t know how to run a business. They made it sound like we made things up. The TV missing was their biggest concern.

Jennifer’s entry provides an accurate representation of the participants’ experiences and their perceptions of Corrib Village. Several diary entries expressed frustration with the services provided in Corrib Village, including a lack of concern from the staff about the instances, such as Jennifer’s, where people had their apartment broken into.

The concern written about most in diary entries and described most often in the interviews was the issue of money. Participants were surprised by exchange rates, costs associated with food, travel, and housing. Jenny summed up the general consensus of participants when she wrote, “I’m going totally broke, no question about that. I’m getting killed in the money department.” The greatest surprise for participants was how the exchange rate impacted their purchasing power. In her interview Jamie described an instance when she was impacted by the exchange rate,

I just found it hard. When we went to London and I cashed traveler checks, I remember I cashed \$50 and it was almost cut in half. It was a reality check for me. I was like, where is the rest of my money? That hit me hard.

Although students felt out of control at times, they also reported positive experiences.

### **I learned so much about myself**

Participants were emphatic in claiming that the study abroad experience provided impacting life lessons. However, they found it difficult to articulate what they actually “learned” about themselves through the study abroad experience. Generally, participants would choose to provide examples of succeeding in a situation where they felt out of control. Leah and Becky’s story is an excellent example of participants’ responses,

Leah: We were in Spain and at the airport. Here we are we’re an hour out of the city where we need to be in Barcelona. We don’t have any pounds, any euros, or American dollars. Of course, why would you have those (group laughter). We needed to get into the city by bus where our hostel was and they didn’t accept credit cards or anything. So we were out of control. We’re speaking a different language.

Rebecca: I felt even more out of control because I don’t speak Spanish and I was following her around.

Leah: So really, it was just me! So I was like, okay, what do I do? I don’t know how to get there. There were only two more buses and we could be stuck at the airport. We might become arrested—no money. Granted, I’m

using my language skills, but when you become nervous, you forget. Like, I can't remember how to say "hola." Here I am, running around, because they say, go here they might exchange money here. I don't understand. And then suddenly we are told to get on the bus and we can make an exchange when we get to the city, or at least that's what we are thinking they are telling us (laughter). Well when we got to the hostel we were able to make an exchange and pay the bus driver. Thank God! (laughter) To sum it up, it was just crazy, insane and hectic. All in all, it ended up being okay. That was my most out of control, out of my element, situation I was in and it really taught me a lot about myself!

When pressed to explain how her study abroad experiences taught her a great deal about herself, Leah claimed, "It's hard to say. I guess I learned that I can do things out of my box. I mean just coming here was a huge challenge! I had to adapt to different personalities, had to get along with everybody." For the most part, learning about oneself was positive and recognized through successfully completing a stressful situation. However, there were a few "learning" experiences that exposed participants to their weaknesses or habits they did not recognize about themselves. Erica's needing to lean on her father for money made her recognize that she was not as effective at managing her finances as she previously thought. A lesson in how people are influenced by their own culture was learned when participants recognized that they interacted differently when they drank in the pubs of Ireland. Wendy described the moment she recognized that the participants were indeed "loud Americans,"

Last night at the bar I could totally see where the "loud Americans" idea comes from. Our group of 15 or so was definitely very loud. We were all laughing and having a great time, but when I walked away, I noticed how much our loudness stood out.

In addition to learning so much about themselves, students also reported the positive impact of experiential learning.

### **You just can't learn this kind of stuff in a classroom!**

The most passionate diary entries and interview descriptions came when participants addressed the importance of experiential learning as it pertained to the phenomenon of studying abroad. Jennifer wrote in her diary that, "I can't believe so many incredible experiences could happen to me in only 7 days. The best part of the time that's passed is that I feel comfortable here." Since most of the participants described a great deal of stress involved in the travel to Ireland, figuring out where to eat and go to the bathroom and feelings of being homesick, it was impacting when they reached a point of feeling comfortable. Participants became quite aware of their behaviors and began to write about times when they realized that they were having ethnocentric thoughts, were policing their behaviors in an attempt to fit in, and when they choose to act like an American knowing that it could bring on ridicule or ignite anti-American senti-

ments. Erin's diary entry is a good example of becoming aware of ethnocentric thoughts and consciously choosing to act like an American,

Last night was so much fun. We sang karaoke. The "proper," quite and boring Europeans just gazed at us—oops sorry—was that an ethnocentric thought there? I guess I just thought that since all they play here is American music, we're entitled to enjoy it, right? Oh well, we had a blast. Although we were the obnoxious "loud Americans," we called ourselves the "Canadian girls" and made a quick exit after our show.

Some of the journal entries posited that participants actually felt a "learning tension" as they had always thought of learning as a classroom activity, but now were immersed in experiential learning. Pam described the tension in her journal,

Learning over here has been very different. Not so much for the tests or assignments in class, but my learning has come mostly through talking with Irish people. These experiences have made me much more aware of my culture and have opened my mind up to a whole new way of seeing America. It's so interesting to me to just ask people what they think of Americans and why they feel that way. Just listening to them is very educational and entertaining to me. I think the main things students abroad should do is talk to the people as much as possible. I think I've learned more at the pubs/social scene than I have at class or from my book. These conversations are what I'll remember.

Victoria saw herself as having to fight to be motivated about the coursework that was assigned. She claimed,

One of the biggest challenges to studying abroad is that there is so much to see and so that the class's part of learning is hard to keep a focus on. I have so much to experience in such a different lifestyle and culture that it is hard to find time and motivation to study.

Participants in this study recognized a tension in the terms study and abroad. In the experiential learning environment of studying abroad participants felt it was difficult to determine when one is a student and when one is not. In the traditional American university experience, one sees learning as the act of attending class, listening to professors, studying, and being evaluated on papers, projects or exams. However, when studying abroad, participants felt that the more important learning occurred by interacting with locals and that the traditional pedagogy employed in the classroom and course assignments interfered with the experiential learning of studying abroad.

### Discussion

The results of this study provide insights into the lived experience of studying abroad and the experiential learning participants identified as impacting. The purpose of this project is to add to the tradition of teachers who have offered suggestions on how to think about pedagogy while teaching abroad (Talbur & Stewart 1999; Wilkinson 2002). Therefore, this discussion will present the conclusions and recommendations together. Finally, the researchers will recognize the limitations of this study and offer suggestions for future research.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Four conclusions were identified from the results of this study. Each conclusion demonstrates a unique challenge that first time study abroad teachers are likely to face.

*Conclusion one:* The results of this study indicate a central concern for educators facilitating study abroad experiences; students have a difficult time with the interdependent terms *study* and *abroad*. In other words while American students have been socialized to think of academic coursework as “educational,” that very act creates a situation where they may not recognize the experiential learning that occurs on a daily basis in their everyday lives. However, when studying aboard the participants were quite aware that they were learning a great deal about the Irish culture, other cultures, differing worldviews, how Americans are perceived, etc. Additionally, participants were acutely aware of that they were learning about their own strengths, weakness, perceptual lenses, as well as their own ethnocentric thoughts and behaviors. With some “learning through immersion” going on, students found it difficult to put the time and energy into their academic work as they normally would. This led to frustrations as participants actually saw the expectations of the academic learning as interfering with the unique opportunity that was presented to them in the abroad experience. This conclusion demonstrates Katula and Threnhauser’s (1999) claim that student’s experiential learning in study abroad programs is important, but not well understood.

*Recommendation one:* Since studying abroad is an experiential learning occurrence it may call for a different type of pedagogy, especially for those teaching courses that they have taught in a traditional American classroom. In the case of this study, participants seemed to separate class content from their experiences outside the classroom. These students talked about how what they felt were the important “learning” they experienced could not be learned in a traditional American classroom. However, they failed to recognize that their learning was experiential. We recommend discussing experiential learning with students so they understand learning can and does occur outside the classroom, especially while studying abroad. Additionally, faculty should consider unique assignments that will provide students an opportunity to connect the experiential and classroom learning together. An example of an assignment that worked well was having students interview an Irish person to gain insight into their culture and its influence on their thoughts and behaviors. The advantage of this assignment was that it allowed students to use skills learned in the classroom (effective inter-

viewing techniques) to gain a more meaningful understanding of the Irish culture (their experiential learning).

*Conclusion two:* It is not surprising that the results of this study indicate that students will naturally have ethnocentric attitudes. This conclusion demonstrates Gallant’s (2002) contention that students learn a great deal about themselves, yet find it difficult to express what they learned. Additionally, participants’ diary entries and interview responses indicate that when students were exposed to their personal ethnocentric attitudes, impacting self-learning occurred as they engaged in reflection and critical thinking about their culture-induced attitudes and ultimately matured in their thoughts. This finding supports Juhasz and Walker’s (1988) belief that lower self-esteem and self-efficacy scores of study abroad students may be a positive demonstration of learning, reflection and maturity. Since participants indicated that they felt that the degree to which they learned about themselves was the most impacting aspect studying abroad, we feel that teachers should facilitate this learning.

*Recommendation two:* Teachers should use classroom interactions as opportunities to facilitate discussions about participants encountering cultural differences and how these experiences impact their learning about self and others. These discussions can become part of the classroom culture. Spending several minutes at the beginning of class talking about interactions in the host country can be a learning experience, even for students who were not involved in the exchange. In the study abroad experience described in this paper, as time progressed, students were able to recognize their ethnocentric views and understood that their view may not always be optimal. We recommend discussing ethnocentrism early in the study abroad experience so that students can reflect about their own values and beliefs early in their study abroad experience.

*Conclusion three:* By the very act of studying abroad, students and first time abroad facilitators are likely to experience anxieties as their basic physiological and safety needs are unfulfilled. Early entries described tensions related to physiological and safety needs which made it difficult for students to focus on either classroom or experiential learning. For example, participants needed some guidance in terms of food, restrooms, slang to avoid, and how to take safety precautions. Fortunately, participants moved through physiological and safety needs fairly quickly. In a traditional classroom, instructors typically do not concern themselves with the physiological or security needs of students. Perhaps study abroad facilitators need to find a way to address these needs.

*Recommendation three:* It is in the best interest of facilitators to reduce the uncertainty involved in studying abroad and specifically, providing participants the information necessary for satisfying their physiological and safety needs. Talbur and Stewart (1999) suggested that getting access to prior study abroad participants observations and experiences might help facilitators shape information provided to new participants and may be using in creating course content. We also recommend discussing students’ needs and strategies that may help them adapt to the culture in which they will be living.

*Conclusion four:* Learning does not stop when students reenter their host country. While not directly represented in the results of this study, participants

in the focus group appreciated the opportunity to talk about the abroad experience. In fact, several claimed that they understood their experiences much better after returning as they had time to reflect. Participants claimed that they wished there were structured opportunities to share their perceptions of learning after they had time to reflect.

*Recommendation four:* Reentry courses are another attempt at allowing students to process their study abroad experience. Because the students in this case study had very different entries while abroad as compared to their responses in the focus group six months after the experience, we also recommend a reentry element upon returning from studying abroad. We feel that an effective way to give this course credence for the students would be to have academic credit attached to it. The credit could be part of the existing credit offered for the abroad experience. For example, a six credit abroad course could have one or two of the credits held for the re-entry course.

### Limitations and Future Research

The results, conclusions, and recommendations of this study are intended to provide future study abroad facilitators with necessary information and potential strategies for providing students with an exceptional learning experience. Yet it is also important to point out that this study represents the experiences of a distinct group of people, studying in a particular culture at a unique time in history. We do not assume that our results are indicative of all students who study abroad and do not intend for our results to be generalized to other populations. It is quite possible that participants who study abroad in different locales and at times when America is not involved in a disputed military engagement would not experience anti-American attitudes or unsanitary/unsafe living conditions. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge these limitations.

The results of this study raise several questions, laying the foundation for future research. Therefore, we provide the following two recommendations for future research. First, the purpose of studying abroad is to accomplish the dual purpose of study and travels to a different culture. Several participants in this study acknowledged that they felt they learned more through their travel and experiences than they did in the classroom. A study that focused on the question of what constitutes "learning" when studying abroad may provide unique insights into participants' perceptions of the abroad education. Such a study could lead to creative pedagogy that would effectively incorporate the terms study and abroad.

Second, participants' journals and interview accounts indicated a variety of tensions that were experienced while studying abroad. A strong body of research in communication studies focuses on dialectical tensions and how they impact intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. A study that focuses on the dialectical tensions experienced while studying abroad may provide insight that would help prepare facilitators to help students work through these tensions.

### Conclusion

This research study provided empirical data to demonstrate the unique learning involved in studying abroad. The results indicate that students consider studying abroad an exceptional educational experience. The results also indicate that students find their abroad education to be deeply personal and impacting. As such, instructional communication scholars should engage in more research to understand the unique pedagogical act of studying abroad. Such inquiry may provide insights that allow educators to replicate the impacting educational experiences achieved abroad in courses in which students stay put. Ultimately, this research posits that creative pedagogy may make the study abroad experience even more educational and impacting.

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