



Essay

Reflections on the Meaning of Study Abroad

Elizabeth Shannon

STUDY ABROAD begins long before students leave their own shores. The moment that children enter day care, nursery school, or kindergarten for the first time, they are in foreign territory, and all their antennae are out, testing, absorbing, learning. They begin to develop the first of their many multiple identities. They are no longer "Johnny" or "Sarah" whom everyone knows and loves at home, but Johnny or Sarah whom no one knows nor initially cares about, and they have to figure out what kind of a new identity they will develop so the danger zone becomes as safe as home. (All parents have had the experience of attending a teacher conference and hearing their child described in ways that could not possibly be the Johnny or Sarah they know and love!) Children also must learn who is a "friend" (the teacher, a friendly child) and who is the "enemy" (the class bully, the kid who bites), and how to deal with them. Leaving familiar surroundings—the sounds, smells, safety, and food of home—and realizing, quite abruptly, that they must learn to adapt to the demands and needs of these strangers, is the first and the most challenging "trip abroad" they will ever take. They will use the same set of skills, more mature, more polished (we hope) when they arrive on a foreign campus and move in with a host family or into an international dormitory.

Some children make that initial journey with more ease, self-confidence, and curiosity than others, just as older students do when they make their first foray into a foreign culture. For some of us, being a stranger in a new land is an exciting challenge; the signals we send out are returned without too much interference. If that first foray into the strange land of school was successful, "new and strange" doesn't send alarm bells clanging. But for others, it is a frightening experience.

Nevertheless, learning to make the journey with ease, whether it is on the first day of school or the day a plane drops one in a foreign field, is a necessary accomplishment. We have to make friends out of our peers; we have to gain the respect of our teachers; we have to develop curiosity and concern about the people around us. The stranger they seem, the more there is to learn. To fear diversity is to fear life itself. As the world becomes smaller and more integrated, the more crucial this accomplishment grows.

Professional life is taking more and more young Americans into the far corners of the world, and travel in another country will not always be a trip of choice. A young friend of mine, just finished with her M.B.A. and two weeks into her first "real" job, was told to be ready to leave for Japan for a three-month stint. She was taken aback and wasn't sure she was ready for the challenge, but having completed a successful and productive year abroad in Italy as an undergraduate, she knew that she could handle entry into a foreign culture. Fortunately, she already liked Japanese food. "I honestly don't think I could have taken on the assignment without the experience of living and studying abroad," she told me on her return.

Even if life's path never takes one to a foreign land, even if one never studies or works abroad, chances are that a citizen of some "foreign land" may become a neighbor, an in-law, a loved one, a boss, a teacher. We simply don't live in monocultures anymore. Learning to accept, enjoy, and respect the differences in other cultures is the very basis of civility, without which life is dreary at best, tumultuous and violent at worst.

As with the acquisition of all skills, the sooner that people begin to understand and appreciate other peoples and other cultures different from their own, the better. I was taken for the first time when I was seven years old to stay with my five cousins who lived on a remote ranch in Mexico, as far away from my town life as any world could be. While I played with dolls, they fed milk from a bottle to their pet fawn. I rode a bike, they rode ponies. Although their mother was Mexican, their father was my father's brother, hence our shared Irish surname. The cousins didn't speak English, a startling concept for me and a fact that I hadn't been let in on when the trip was being planned.

"How," I asked them incredulously, "can your name be McNelly and you don't speak English?" Fortunately, they couldn't understand the impudent question, and luckily for me, majority rule prevailed that summer. It was Spanish or sign language. With the nimbleness and unself-consciousness of a seven-year-old, I chattered with them at ease by the end of the summer. I also learned some of the ways of Mexican ranch life, Mexican culture, and Mexican food-all of which have been an important and pleasurable part of my life since.

When children have the advantage of spending summers with a relative or family friend from a different part of the world, as I did, the experiences will be far more important than the school year was, in terms of expanding the child's mind, and creating an interest in "foreign" worlds and a trust of the people who inhabit them.

For teenagers, study abroad programs abound, and given the mysterious ways of teens, it is difficult to judge the program's effectiveness. I have seen good ones as well as ones that are a waste of parents' money. I think the programs that most seriously engage teenagers' interest are those that take them to the land of their ethnic roots. They will be visiting places that have been hallowed in family lore and will respond to that emotionally. They will feel that they have, in some way, "come home."

In my experience, teens visiting or studying abroad in an organized program often don't reach out beyond the peer group with whom they arrived. But when they do, they meet other teens from different cultures, and perhaps begin to learn another language. I observed Spanish-speaking teenagers flocking to Ireland for summer programs to learn or improve their English. It is fertile ground for teenage romance, and many of them flourish. There is no better way to go straight to the heart of another culture than by entering the heart of its citizens. The summer visitors go home, often not much more enlightened about the Battle of the Boyne, or Brian Boru's birthplace, but having established a network of friends, and certainly a broader political and geographical concept of the island they visited. And very often, as teenagers, Americans learn one of the most important lessons of their life: The "American Way" is not always necessarily the best, the most efficient, or the smartest.

When I was in college, taking a year off from school to study abroad was rare. More often, students were given a summer in Europe as a graduation present, to round off their education, and to teach them a little of the art, history, and culture they missed in school. With trench coats, cameras, maps, and traveler's checks, American students rolled across Europe in those summers in beige, waterproof waders. Everyone loved their gorgeous teeth, their friendly smiles, and their

traveler's checks.

I made the token trip after my first year of college, in the late 1950s: ten weeks, ten countries, student tour guides, grotty hostels, and grand times. For me, getting off the old, creaky Holland-American Line ship in Rotterdam, looking around and seeing the handsome and historic architecture, the canals, the bicycles, even wooden clogs and acres of tulip fields, were all dreams and fantasies come true. My family has been in America too long for our ethnic roots to have stayed alive, but my childhood had been nourished by the children's literature of Europe. I stepped off the boat and saw "The Little Dutch Tulip Girl" come alive right in front of me! I didn't feel like a stranger; I felt at home because the sights I was seeing were so familiar and so alive in my imagination. I had that experience all over Europe that summer. I climbed the Swiss Alps with my good friend "Heidi." I walked with my friends from "Madeleine" across Paris. Those wonderful stories were peopled with closer childhood friends than many of the real life variety, and knowing them made the transition for me into European culture not one of shock but of "coming home."

The euphoria of it all sent me on the second day of my trip to the Holland-American Line office in Rotterdam to sell my return ticket home. It was the wonderfully rash, overconfident, and enthusiastic response of a very young woman in love with the romance of a foreign land. It seemed infinitely more exotic than anything I had ever known before, and now that it was in my hand, I was determined not to let it end in ten weeks and ten countries. My friends, fellow travelers, and guides thought me daft, of course. My parents' initial reaction can't be related in an academic journal. But it all ended happily ever after, as did the beloved books that had spawned this love affair with Europe. I did, in fact, get a job and support myself: I made feeble inroads into the German language, traveled the length and breadth of Europe in a delapidated Fiat that had major and mysterious breakdowns, usually in villages so small the mechanic doubled as the waiter in the local bar. I made hundreds of friends and had hundreds of adventures that remain in vivid technicolor in my memory.

It was, I realize now, an offbeat year abroad, not structured by an academic program and with no "credit" at the end of the year. But it gave me a steadfast and enduring belief in the importance of understanding different cultures and adapting one's self to the beguiling, mystifying, frustrating, imponderable ways of "the rest of the world." That belief has served me well in the life that was to be my future, when I returned home and back to college at the end of the year.

I didn't know then that much of my adult life would be spent living abroad; that I would serve my country as a public figure in another land and fit myself into an ever-fluid diplomatic life. Nor did I know that I would act as the conduit for Boston University to a stream of visitors from every country in the world. Students at twenty years old have no idea where life-professional and personal will take them. Chances are increasingly high that part of their life will be lived abroad, or that they will take business and pleasure trips around the world. Either way, the study abroad year will be a springboard that will serve them well for the rest of their international adventures.

I asked a friend of mine recently, an Irishman who spends some time each year teaching in Africa, why he enjoys going there so much. His reply reflects a major component of the study abroad philosophy: "When I am here in Ireland," he said, "in a community where I am known and familiar, I make no effort being anything special. I am what I am, people know me, have certain expectations of me, and that's that. In Africa, no one knows or, in many cases, cares who or what I am. The things that make me uniquely me-my education, my speech, my clothes-are meaningless to them. I can-and must-write myself all over again!"

Writing oneself all over again in a different culture is another of the difficult, challenging, and ultimately rewarding goals of living and studying abroad. One arrives at a destination with no identity other than that of "American." To many people in many lands, this identification may be extremely positive and enable one to make friends easily and quickly (at least until one displays some less charming attributes). One can even take that positive image, polish it, and turn it into someone even more interesting than the original model. Who's to know?

On the other hand, that first and instant recognition of "American" may foster an extremely negative reaction, and the task of gaining acceptance is harder. That is one of the most challenging and creative efforts for someone living in a culture that may be, for historic, economic, or political reasons, hostile to "America. The hostility may have nothing to do with one personally, but as the handy representative of a disliked society the student may become a target. Then it is important to guard against becoming too defensive about policies that one may feel are reprehensible but, in the interest of being "a good American," may feel duty-bound to defend. It's quite amazing how important being a good American becomes suddenly, when one is the sole representative.

For students living and studying abroad, learning the language of the host country makes the experience infinitely richer and more interesting. Summer tourists aren't going to know the language of every country they visit but can still enjoy the architecture, food, flowers, music, scenery. (I personally sometimes find it tranquil not to understand what everyone around me is saying: I don't have to decide whether to agree or disagree.) However, for students fortunate enough to be spending a semester or a year in one country, immersed in its culture and studying in its schools, it would be quite foolish and unpardonably lazy not to learn the language, speak it, and read it with proficiency.

As with all pleasant, positive, and exciting adventures, a period of study abroad passes more quickly than one ever dreamed. Time to accomplish the list of "musts" grows short. Having created a "foreign" self into some semblance of a human being that hosts can know and like, and having absorbed their culture and their ways to the point of being very snooty toward any poor, unsuspecting American tourist that might cross one's path (carrying the same baggage one carried only a few months ago), assimilation is beginning. Midway through the allotted period of time abroad, students should be required to assess their program. Chances are, the romance and newness of being abroad have given way to the routines of student life. It's a good time for a student to ask: Why I am here? What am I learning? Is this program everything I had hoped for, or do I feel discouraged and disheartened? Has it been a lonely time? Have I had (or created) the opportunity to mix with students of my host country, or has my program limited me to other Americans?

One great hazard for students going abroad to study for the first time is the hope that their new surroundings will solve any problems they bring with them from home or that somehow they will become a different kind of person, undergo a "personality lift." Students who are bored with studies and life at school, or not doing well in classwork, will probably be bored with life in a new home, and their academic achievements will not improve.

If they are aching from a broken relationship, the pain will not lessen in another country. Many students fall into the trap of thinking that being "foreigners" makes them into more exotic figures than they are in their own land, but unfortunately this doesn't happen. A study abroad year should be approached as an intellectual and cultural experience, not an emotional panacea. And if, somewhere along the way, students do feel more at peace with themselves, find their new surroundings more challenging and life more exciting, then it's "icing on the cake."

Students seldom realize how much they have assimilated from a new culture until they are home again. For months students in surroundings less comfortable than home may have longed for a good hot shower, or a homemade beef stew, or a night at the movies with their pals. Then they are home again, and suddenly the good old familiar ways may seem very strange indeed. Why can't Americans be as precise as the French? As courteous and gentle as the Japanese? As ebullient as the Italians? Where are the lovely tastes, smells, and sounds to which they had grown accustomed?

Then they suddenly realize that they are suffering from a malady without a name: homesickness for a place that isn't home. That realization gives way to the satisfaction of knowing that any part of the world can become home, and any one of its citizens a cherished neighbor, and that's one of the very important reasons to go abroad in the first place.

Back at home or in their familiar dorm, students may feel the twinges of that malady and remember with pleasure the certain way the evening light made shadows across an umber wall; they may recall a pungent aroma in the air at dinner time, the call of a bird in the jungle, the timbre of a voice bursting into song behind a walled garden. . . endearing memories that will remain as much a part of their imagination as a familiar wheat field or a green mountain or high-rise condo. In fact, the memories are even more important to the fullness of their character, because the life they have just left, their study abroad experience, is all their own. The impressions they made on their hosts were not colored by their own family or their reputation. Similarly, the experiences they have brought home with them are, in some sense, a secret part of their personality. They can tell endless stories of those experiences to friends and family. Maybe their parents will listen. The friends will smile and drift away. That wonderful, exhilarating six months or year is all theirs. What they become as their personality slowly forms into its final mold will be influenced by those "foreign" experiences. It is a component that will make them far more complex, interesting, and stimulating people.

Depending on how deeply, and with what tenacity, they delved into the history and culture of the host country while abroad, the experiences they have brought home will make them part of a circle of "experts" on the part of the world they visited. The political, economic, and cultural future of the host country will hold their interest and fascination for the rest of their lives.

American students for whom a semester or year of study abroad is possible have a very special opportunity for intellectual and cultural growth. We should insist that they take it, for it will be one of the wisest decisions of their lives.

[home](#) | [editorial board](#) | [sponsoring institutions](#) | [back issues](#)
[manuscript guidelines](#) | [upcoming issues](#) | [subscriptions](#)