

Students' Stories of Studying Abroad: Reflections Upon Return

Jane Costello, PhD

Distance Education, Learning and Teaching Support
Memorial University of Newfoundland (Canada)

Abstract

Study abroad brings an enriching experience to students' academic and personal lives. This narrative essay relays two students' experiences with study abroad sojourns and touches upon their technology use during their study abroad as recounted in semi-structured interviews. Details of their cultural experiences and reflections thereof as well as the impact these experiences had on their lives are presented. Student participation in study abroad semesters is increasing each year. Understanding previous students' experience studying abroad, how this impacted their studies and life afterwards can inform decision making of other students considering this option. Additionally, awareness of the technologies used to stay in touch with those at home informs administrative and technical decisions for institutions to consider.

Keywords: study abroad, higher education, narrative, technology

Study abroad is a popular university experience for students as it allows them to travel to another country or continent to study in a foreign institution. Students can expect exposure to foreign languages and cultures, and possibly have opportunities to learn the language and immerse themselves in cultural experiences. The number of students engaging in study abroad is growing (OECD, 2011).

Student participation in study abroad semesters is increasing each year; the numbers of students studying abroad have increased four-fold in the last two decades (OECD, 2011). In Canada 45, 090 students studied abroad (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). According to the Institute of International Education (2013), 283,332 students from American institutions studied abroad in 2010/12 (para 1). As this number continues to grow, it is ever important to hear and learn from students' experiences in order to know what works well for participants and how this experience impacts their lives upon repatriation. Similarly, as the technology use continues to integrate daily lives it is important to know which technologies study abroad students find useful.

Review of Related Literature

Study Abroad is an academic experience where students "physically leave [their home countries] to engage in college study, cultural interaction, and more in the host country. It may include foreign language study, residing with a foreign host family, internships, and service" (McKeown, 2009, p. 12). It can range from one week to a full academic year or program. Deardorff (2009) warns of the tendency to focus on Western-based definitions. While there is consensus that study abroad programs see students traveling to a foreign country to study, there are debates relating to what form these programs take. The debates relate to its duration, credit-granting, collegial arrangement with educational institution, and related finances. For some, credit must be received if it is to be considered a study

abroad (LeBlanc, 2003). Niser (2010) outlines four types of study abroad programs: (a) one-to-one arrangements between institutions; (b) partnerships with host institution; (c) programs run by study abroad providers; and (d) programs managed by home institutions.

Barriers and Benefits

Barriers to study abroad for most students include: (a) perception of such programs being reserved for the rich; (b) costly; (c) minority's fears of facing prejudices; and (d) advisors who shy away from questions of race and ethnicity. Walsh (2010) warns that a "lack of integration of overseas students represents a missed opportunity for all students to develop intercultural competence, increasingly valuable as competition for jobs and resources becomes more global" (p. 557). Stewart (2010) warns that study abroad for second language learning is less effective today than twenty years ago. This is due primarily to social networking, email, and visitors which interfere with the process of learning a second language.

The benefits of study abroad far outweigh the barriers and drawbacks. The first type of benefits relate to the choice of venue: (a) choice of durations (Norton, 2008); (b) readily available campus-support networks (Norton, 2008); and (c) sharing experiences with friends and family (Norton, 2008). Secondly, professional and academic benefits include: (a) academic commitment (Freedman, 2010); (b) improving foreign language skills (Freedman, 2010; Parsons, 2010; Slimbach, 2005); (c) personal development (Deardorff, 2006; Freedman, 2010; Parsons, 2010); (d) improved career development (Freedman, 2010); and (e) return on investment (Norton, 2008; Parsons, 2010).

The third, intellectual benefits, include (a) disposition to critical reflection (Desai Trilokekar, Jones, & Shubert, 2009); (b) bouleversement and re-calibration of lives (Bilash & Kang, 2007; Desai Trilokekar, et al., 2009; Roberts, 2002); (c) decreased xenophobia, fear, and ethnic distance (Parsons, 2010); and (d) deeper understanding of oneself (Freedman, 2010; Gill, 2010; Malone, 2008; Parsons, 2010; Ooper, Teichler, & Calson, 1990). The fourth type, cultural growth benefits, include: (a) enlightened international knowledge (Bilash & Kang, 2007; Freedman, 2010; Ooper, et al., 1990; Palomba, 2006; Parsons, 2010; Slimbach, 2005); (b) changing opinions about the home country (Ooper, et al., 1990; Parsons, 2010; Slimbach, 2005); (c) changing opinions about other countries (Deardorff, 2006, 2009; Ooper, et al., 1990; Parsons, 2010; Slimbach, 2005); (d) in-depth exposure to other cultures (Deardorff, 2006; Freedman, 2010; Parsons, 2010; Slimbach, 2005); and (e) cultural cosmopolitanism (Parsons, 2010).

A final type of benefit sees increases in participants' competencies. Study abroad is often associated with facilitating intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2009), cross cultural competence (Bilash & Kang, 2007), transcultural competence (Slimbach 2005) internationalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Desai Trilokekar, et al., 2009; Knight, 2003; Parsons, 2010), and globalization (Trilokekar, et al., 2009; Kirby, 2008).

Technology

The study abroad literature referenced above does not make reference to technological use. It was likely not an aspect of interest in these studies. However computer based technology permeates many aspects of our lives. It is used to help keep us in touch with or avoid contact with others, to search for information, to entertain us and provide much efficiency in our lives. Many forms of technology, such as computers, phones, and music devices are ubiquitous among learners today. Wherever these students travel, their technologies follow. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports that Internet "user penetration has been growing on average at double-digit rates over the past ten years" (2013, p. 9-10). Montgomery (2010) writes about the impact of technology on globalization; today's

technological communication means that distance is not necessarily a barrier to non-local friendships. ... In addition to email and the internet, mobile phones and text messaging appear to be a highly significant means for international students to communicate with friends and relatives, both locally and internationally. (p. 68)

Furthermore, technology can support friendship and comradeship which relates to distributed global communities unimpeded by geospatial distance (Montgomery, 2010). Palomba (2006) warns that technology is not universal, but contextually and culturally-dependent. As such its creator's values of speed, accessibility, openness, and immediacy are inherent and must be considered. The technologies used by the students while abroad are identified as well as the purpose for which they were employed.

Five authors stress the existing gaps in research relating to study abroad. Regan (2003) questions study abroad programs' effects on students upon repatriation; while Walsh (2010) notes that there is little research from students' perspectives on study abroad experiences. McKeown (2009) says it's a "subject with a worthwhile, but limited, body of research" (p. 12). Bilash and Kang state that research into "study abroad programs for language teachers is scant" (2007, p. 206). Finally, Montgomery (2010) notes that much of the research in this field in the last twenty years has been large scale quantitative surveys studying students' views. Few studied *an* aspect in detail; of these, less looked at social and cultural contexts international students' presence created.

This narrative research sought to understand and retell students' experience of study abroad and technology use by answering the questions: What are students' study abroad experiences and technology use while away?; and how does the study abroad experience impact their lives upon return?

Research Method

As a narrative case study, this paper seeks to present and examine the storyteller's experience of the topic, allowing individuals' storied lives to be recounted individually and socially (Johns Hopkins University & Fritz, 2008), while addressing "complexity, multiplicity of perspectives and human-centeredness" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 31). Narrative involves the study of the ways individuals experience the world wherein interviewees are simultaneously "engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p. 4).

A way to think about living (Connelly, Phillion, & He, 2003), narratives are situated in a tri-dimensional space of time, interaction, and place (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010) involving a balancing act stressing interaction of the personal, social and contextual while highlighting interviewees' stories rather than interviewer's adopted theory or ideology (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010); thereby allowing the locateur to share in the experience. Narratives reveal stories that weave past, present and future reflections ultimately leading to awakenings and transformations (Coulter, Michael & Poynor, 2007).

The researcher enters into a convivial discourse with participants wherein participants freely speak to their experiences of a particular phenomenon in their own words and in their own way. The narrative approach provided the participants with an opportunity to describe the change stemming from experience, how it's understood in new ways and how it could inform other's decisions (Clandinin & Huber, 2010).

The two participants' narratives shared their experiences in in-depth, open-ended interviews relating to their study abroad sojourns in constructing their life histories through collaborative discourse with the interviewer (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) rather than recounting their life's events (Chase, 2005). With informed consent in place, the interviews were recorded on the interviewer's encrypted computer. Transcripts were verified by each participant before analysis began. Sampling for these conversational interviews was purposive; participants having experienced a study abroad semester during their bachelor degree program and available within project timeframe.

While seeking to retell participants' stories about study abroad, life impact and technology use associated with it, several prompts and probes were used to encourage elaboration and comprehensive stories. These included questions about: (a) why study abroad; (b) what did it entail; (c) what was studied and how it related to degree; (d) what was learnt; (e) previous international travel experience; and (f) dealing with unexpected events.

Data Analysis and Results

Two participants' stories are retold. Parallels with literature are presented; illustrating how students' experiences align with or compliment others' research. Features of narrative inquiry including: plotline, character, setting, action, place, time, and point of view (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; and Webster & Mertova, 2007) are revealed in retelling stories.

Kelsey's Story

Kelsey, a graduate student at a central Canadian university, participated in a study abroad semester as part of her studies before completing her bachelor's degree at an eastern Canadian university. In an interest to improve her French language skills she opted to attend one semester at a university-sponsored and facilitated study abroad institution in West Africa in the Winter of 2005 which was arranged by the home institution. Kelsey learned much about the host country's culture, which has influenced her current studies and which she will remember always.

There was not very advanced technology; there were overhead projectors and internet cafes for email. However, the cafes were very slow and did not work well so Kelsey went only once or twice a week to send email and pictures. Kelsey decided study abroad here to learn and practice French and as it would provide a really unique and different experience somewhere far away where it was warm; Canada's winter being cold. Kelsey's home university had a program set up with the university in West Africa where students successfully attended previously. A number of professors were from Africa and endorsed this type of study abroad as it allowed students to experience another culture and see what Africa was like.

Kelsey lived in a village north of the town, traveling to university by bus or taxi with classmates, where the official language was French. Living with a family, sharing meals; Kelsey noted "just through everything that you do; going to the market, just buying things and going to school. ... is experiencing their culture". Kelsey got to know some of the locals, befriending one of the host family's daughters. Generally, the foreigners sort of kept to themselves, not mixing with locals much. Reflecting on why this was, Kelsey wondered if everything was just too different, or due to a language barrier. Kelsey was surprised by the amount of English spoken in this French-speaking country and spoke mostly English while there. Through a housemate, Kelsey gained exposure to another school that "seemed to have a more integrated program" and was able to mix a bit more with the locals, which was rewarding.

Kelsey's experience had a notable impact on her life and point of view; it was pretty eye-opening and life changing, and shocking! ... it sort of put things into perspective in North America, ... makes you realize how different things are outside of the developed world ... [and] realize that we're very lucky over here [in Canada]. There are a lot of people in [West Africa] who make a lot less money so that changes everything.

Kelsey took five courses while abroad, for which credit was received at the home university in eastern Canada. These were courses in literature, social studies, translation and two in basic grammar. Upon return to Canada, Kelsey noted a positive change in study habits, working harder and taking advantage of more opportunities. Kelsey decided to embrace winter more, learned to ski and tried to learn to skate. Kelsey has not returned to West Africa but would definitely consider it or studying in other countries. Kelsey took a lot away from this study abroad experience, reflecting:

maybe I'm less selfish now. I'd like to think so, I don't know if that's true. And, I just try to, I don't know, be more grateful and I'm just, I guess I'm just more aware of how different things are for other people and how many advantages I have.

Kelsey's experience impacts current studies, planning, in that "planned communities can improve quality of life for people and make their life easier and more enjoyable". Kelsey stays in touch

with a few people from the study abroad experience, mostly through Facebook. Kelsey learned a lot from fellow students.

Kelsey noted as well the commitment of the West Africans to their religion and spiritual life. Kelsey is an athlete and had to change the preferred sport while on study abroad, “running was pretty much abandoned as it was considered socially unacceptable”. Instead, swimming became the sport of choice as she had access to a first-rate pool. Kelsey attended a few local parties which were ‘cultural’ and ‘a neat experience’. One evening Kelsey witnessed an exorcism of a lady who was said to be possessed by a spirit from the ocean. “It was sort of like a really wild dance with drums and a lot of crazy things going on.” Reflecting, Kelsey suspected “they were probably just putting it maybe in terms they thought I’d understand.”

Kelsey remembered how poor the locals were by western standards, not having TVs and electronics, for example. Many people had absolutely nothing at all, there were “a lot of really impoverished people who lived on the street and they’re just everywhere”, which made Kelsey feel guilty. Foreign students were advised not to give them money as “it makes them become dependent and sort of creates a really negative situation”. In an effort to feel useful, Kelsey volunteered for two organizations: habitat for humanity and a local organization that provided social help and emergency relief for people in bad situations.

Alex’s Story

Alex is an artist who has worked in a café and as a special needs preschool teacher. Alex participated in a study abroad semester while completing a bachelor’s degree in English Literature from a southern university in the United States. The study abroad, inspired by boredom and uncertainty about studies, brought Alex to a Scandinavian country for a semester in the Winter of 2006. The study abroad semester was arranged by study abroad providers. Alex became engaged to a local Scandinavian and returned the following year for an additional sojourn as the relationship evolved.

Alex remembers this experience and a friendship formed with fondness and is very appreciative of the opportunity abroad as it provided a better understanding of the broader world and exposure to both the Scandinavian culture and cultures of other exchange students from other parts of Europe, South America and Korea. Alex laughed often when revisiting memories during the interview, indicating how much she really enjoyed the experience.

Like the other students, Alex was curious about people and the places from which others came. As locals tended to address them in English there were few opportunities to pick up the new language. Nevertheless, one time Alex was on a tram and someone said ‘entaxi’ to her before passing by. Following repetitions of this situation Alex realized ‘entaxi’ meant *pardon me* or *excuse me* in the Scandinavian language. “Just hearing what different words might sound or feel like” was very interesting to Alex. Now, living again in the southern US, there is no opportunity to speak the Scandinavian language, which, for Alex, is a pity.

Alex had the opportunity to spend time with local families. During subsequent revisits Alex traveled to BellaRussa and Russia. Alex felt that it helped in character building and provided certain humbleness particularly when seeing “people who wouldn’t have very much at all would be very eager to share it with you”.

Scandinavia offered many appealing cultural elements: appreciation of and connection to nature, stronger than that of the US; and understanding of resource limitations, using public transport and bikes, even in winter. Before going to Scandinavia, Alex read about the culture and recognized the stereotype of its people being peaceful and very much in connection with nature; “it was one of the last countries in the western hemisphere to join ... in the industrial revolution. ... people ... were still living more a lifestyle of self-sustenance and, ahm, self-reliance, ahm. ... it was very different”.

Alex took five classes for which she received credit on two from her US home university which was okay as “the courses were really interesting”. A Scandinavian literature course Alex thought was “maybe the best class that I took there because it helped me get a better understanding of the [...] culture just from reading different poetry and literature works, ah, folktales”. Another was called

Shamanism and Culture by an anthropologist who had lived with and shadowed a Lappish shaman, coming to understand many of their rituals. Taking courses in Scandinavia was very beneficial as it ignited more interest in and fascination with studies at home. Alex notes that she was

in a bit of a rut ..., not totally satisfied with some of my teachers, and, ahm, somewhat bored in some of my classes and probably just needing some type of shift or change to stir up more like self-curiosity or interest in what I was learning.

So Alex jumped at the “opportunity to be in a whole different culture on the other side of the world and frigid climate”; to which a hearty laugh was shared. The excitement of meeting people from Italy, Germany and different places, to share things in common with, and learn from was inspiring. They went on outings together; to ruins of an old castle; to a dairy farm in Lapland above the northern circle, renting cabins and cross country skiing for the first time – which Alex loved; and to a sauna, which is really popular in Scandinavia. Scandinavians love sauna, going at least once a week. Alex’s laughter revealed fond memories of the sauna. Alex would love to be a sauna steward one day, to operate a sauna.

Technology-wise, Alex used email and a Scandinavian cell phone, bought upon arrival, to stay in touch with people back home. Once back in the US, letters and packages were exchanged with close Scandinavian friends. Technology did not play a significant role. Back home, Alex is more aware of those around, particularly those with accents. Alex is eager to

meet people from other parts of the world because in a way it’s like traveling but you don’t have to go anywhere because you can just chat with them to get a sense of what life is like where they’re from.

Following the study abroad, Alex returned for a year and a half and at one point was considering settling down in Scandinavia and maybe marrying. Alas, Alex and partner split after two years “because they couldn’t decide on a continent!” Alex hopes to one day return to Scandinavia, having been most impressed with the quality of the food, and feels it is a bit sad that it’s not a little closer so “more visits could be organized”.

Discussion

Students’ experiences in study abroad reveal unique, yet common experiences. While some experiences, such as the sauna, travels to nearby countries, exorcism, and impoverishment of locals were unique to individual stories, impetus for and preparations to go, witness of local customs, exposure to local and foreign languages, meeting other study abroad participants, interactions with locals and technologies used were common to each. The way these manifest themselves differed for Kelsey and Alex. Several of the benefits outlined in the literature were encountered by Kelsey and Alex such as: (a) disposition to critical thinking; (b) support networks; (c) deeper self-awareness; (d) increased academic commitment; (e) increased intercultural development; (f) improved career development; (g) improved communication skills; and (h) deeper global and international competence.

The biggest challenge experienced by both was developing relationships with locals. Deardorff (2009) tells us that “[b]uilding authentic relationships, however, is key in this cultural learning process – through observing, listening, and asking” (p. xiii). It is from these authentic relationships, which rely on respect and trust, we learn from each other. Alex befriended a few locals and other students and became engaged to a local. Kelsey befriended the host’s daughter and students in other programs who were integrated more with locals. Making connections to locals seems to be of interest and benefit to participants as it affords social interaction, leading to cultural awareness. Their ability to find ways to integrate stemmed Walsh’s (2010) fears about not developing intercultural competence due to lack of integration. While their ability to acquire the local languages was limited, it was due to the lack of and

types of interaction and encouragement with the native speakers. Stewart's (2010) concerns (social networking, email, and visitors) did not come into play in these contexts.

Both Kelsey and Alex received credit for their study abroad classes; though Alex's courses were rewarded with fewer credits from the home university. Picard (2002) reminds students to ensure that they receive credit for the courses they complete while abroad. Nevertheless, study abroad is about more than attaining credit towards a degree. The awakening and awareness it generates in participants both enriches their lives and influences their futures. Alex makes a point to strike up conversations with foreigners visiting 'home' in the south-east US when possible upon hearing their foreign accents. Kelsey's interest Planning draws from the West African experience, in terms of wanting to influence the design and plans of communities such that they benefit its inhabitants. Seeing how little so many in West Africa had while managing to eke out an existence was inspirational for Kelsey. Both participants, upon repatriation, made conscious efforts to more greatly appreciate and take advantage of opportunities presenting themselves back in North America.

Both participants had seen and lived in low-tech study abroad environments and noted the stark differences to home and North American's reliance on technology. Though e-mail, Facebook (and other social software), and cell phones existed at the time, Kelsey and Alex used them limitedly for their studies or to stay in touch with those back home. Whether because the technology was scarce and expensive, such as in Kelsey's case, or because it was not high priority or expensive, such as in Alex's case. Kelsey sent email from a local internet café from time-to-time and Alex used email and a Scandinavian-bought cell phone. Alex's study abroad university gave her access to computer labs whereas Kelsey's saw overhead projectors and photocopies of books as being the technology level. West Africa did not seem to have the resources and infrastructure to support a high-tech computer and internet service. When the internet was available, it was expensive and unreliable. While Scandinavia did have more modern information and communication technologies, their cost necessitated Alex being frugal with its use. It would be interesting to know what changes, if any have happened, technology-wise in both locations in the interceding years. Their experiences echo experience reported by Montgomery (2010) and Palomba (2006) as described in the literature previously. Increased emphasis on use of and increasing access to affordable ICTs could facilitate closer and longer relationships with students and locals in the study abroad countries, allowing them to stay in touch once students have repatriated and possibly open new and more international collaborative endeavors.

Both students' study abroad experiences had impacts upon their lives upon return home. Both were able to settle into and complete their studies; were more appreciative of advantages and opportunities afforded at home; are more aware of cultural and international issues; and are desirous to seek further intercultural experiences both at home and away. Kelsey's narrative highlights the extreme poverty of West Africa, in comparison to Canada. Kelsey was able to turn this reality into a positive by volunteering for organizations that helped the poor while abroad. Similarly, Alex was struck by the generosity of those who so evidently had so little. Alex volunteers in a soup kitchen each Sunday and seeks ways to reach out to others and be useful when possible.

Kelsey and Alex each experienced personal growth and maturity due to their experiences, as well as elements of cultural diversity, as identified by Goodfellow and Lamy (2009): geographical, historical, climatic, religious, political, and linguistic. Kelsey and Alex both extended their intercultural competence; their stories illuminating experiences demonstrating "feelings, tolerance, respect, empathy and flexibility" (Belisle, 2008, p. 2).

Conclusions

This study contributes to the much needed qualitative research on study abroad experiences. It touches upon the impact the sojourns had on students upon repatriation from students' perspectives. In some respects Kelsey and Alex learned and took away more than they bargained for from their respective study abroad sojourns, relating to themselves and others. Kelsey's and Alex's stories reveal rich cultural experiences which have impacted their lives upon their returns home in different ways,

helping them appreciate the opportunities afforded them at home as well as increasing their awareness of interculturality.

Ironically, both participants spoke about taking advantage of opportunities presented upon return home, yet, the very act of taking advantage of an opportunity – study abroad – stemmed this awakening; they have come full circle. It was the fulfillment of an opportunity that inspired them to want to take advantage of opportunities. Years later, both continue to reflect on and be impacted by this experience and its social and international implications. This profound impact strongly supports the benefits study abroad opportunities offer, particularly in relation to its ability to foster intercultural competence.

While both students endeavored to immerse themselves in the local language, this proved challenging and less than fruitful. They did, however, experience varied, rich cultural events which allowed them to expand their social and cultural awareness. Results cannot be extended to generalize technology use or impact of study abroad of students outside of North America (NA) as the dataset is too small and non-NA students were not included in this study. As both students were undergraduates; their experiences do not necessarily reflect those of students from other demographics.

In retelling participants' experiences, narratives strive to present the stories such that readers are almost experiencing the phenomenon themselves. These two narratives attempt to do so. More research is needed in this area to gain a fuller picture of today's study abroad experiences, including technologies and post-study impacts. Future work could involve presenting narratives of more participants from the same study abroad trips; or different contexts. A stronger focus on technology use during these sojourns would also be of interest. Further research may see development of framework for successful intercultural study abroad programs which institutions could adopt to ensure student success and strengthen intercultural competence.

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About the Author:

JANE COSTELLO, PhD is a Senior Instructional Design Specialist at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Jane's interests include instructional systems design, learner centered feedback, learning communities, factors that impact student learning, and tablet computing in education. E-mail: jcostello@mun.ca