

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING IN INTERNATIONAL SHORT-TERM FIELD STUDY EXPERIENCES AT THE GRADUATE LEVEL

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ABSTRACT: This paper derives from a case study of a 10-day cross-cultural field study experience held in Italy in which graduate students from master and doctoral levels in adult education participated. During group reflections, several students who participated in the course expressed the value of learning through personal connections made with students as well as the instructor. This relationship aspect of the short-term cross-cultural learning experience has only been briefly discussed in the literature. The research was framed by situated learning, and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), with an emphasis on the relationships built in learning practice abroad. Student blogs were analyzed to provide evidence of the benefits of interpersonal relationships to deepen learning in adult study abroad. This research offers insights into the nature of relational learning during field study experiences, learning outcomes that resulted from these relationships, and ways to offer similar learning opportunities during international field study experiences in graduate education programs.

Keywords: adult study abroad; adult study tours; relationships in adult learning; graduate study abroad

International student mobility in higher education is increasing at record rates (European Union, 2013; Hudzik & Briggs, 2012). While the majority of students who study in foreign locales are undergraduates, opportunities for graduate students to earn credit in study abroad programs are on the rise (Dirkx, et al., 2014). Dirkx, et al. (2014), however, stress that graduate students are different from undergraduate students in that their goals and purposes for participating in study abroad are often different.

In summer 2016, *International Comparative Adult and Higher Education Study Tour* (a graduate problems course in adult education), was attended by 10 graduate students from a large, public university in the southwest U.S. The learning goal of the course was to engage participants in collectively constructing new understandings of how individuals of different cultures, spiritual paths, and influences conceptualize knowing, knowledge, and adult education. The course required critical consumption of academic texts and an 8-day sojourn in Italy connected with a graduate adult education program at an Italian university. The course content included exploring a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity and the creation of an inquiry framework underpinning an action research project. Field experiences comprised of visiting sites of knowledge and cultural understanding, discussion with participants and Italian colleagues, and individual reflection activities. One of the reflection activities was a series of blog postings that were initiated by prompts that directed students to reflect in specific ways about their learning in the course. One of the striking themes easily recognized in both the blogs and informal reflection discussions that occurred throughout the course was the value participants placed on the relationships and interpersonal encounters they experienced

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during the course – both with course participants and Italians abroad. As such, we conducted an investigation to learn more about relational aspects that influenced adult learning in a short-term study abroad program. The research questions guiding our study included: What are the characteristics of the relationships that were built during the graduate study tour? And, what was learned through these relational encounters?

Brief Review of Related Literature

At present, much of the literature regarding international education focuses on undergraduate students and the benefits that derive from study abroad. Research on graduate study abroad is sparse and tends to focus on course development and transformational learning outcomes. As study abroad opportunities for graduate students continue to increase, understanding how to enhance the educational experience during the field study is imperative. Relationships between students, students and instructors, and students and international individuals, may have significant impacts on learning. The relationship aspect of short-term cross-cultural learning experiences, however, has only been briefly discussed in research.

We know that relationships with peers and faculty can enrich learning in higher education (Arnold, Kuh, Vesper, & Schuh, 1993; Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1998). Lundberg's (2003) findings investigating relationships in adult learning in higher education asserted that learning was enhanced when students viewed administrators as "flexible, helpful, and considerate rather than rigid, impersonal and bound by regulations" (p. 682). She also posited that similar to younger learners, adult students benefit from "educationally related peer-relationships" (p. 682). Discussion of relationship building during study abroad at the undergraduate level concludes that relationships formed while abroad are a natural progression for undergraduate students and can enhance the learning process (Talbur & Stewart, 1999). Within the adult education research, Dirkx, Spohr, Tepper, and Tons (2010) conducted a study with adult learners who participated in a study abroad program in hopes of understanding the transformational experiences that occur during field studies. Their research revealed that personal relationships influenced how the students perceived the study abroad experience, whether transformational or not. Likewise, Coryell (2011) conducted interviews with graduate and undergraduate study abroad participants and found that the relationships formed between students and instructors while abroad provided "rich opportunities for learning" (p. 8). The student testimonials suggested relationships were formed while abroad that meaningfully enhanced the experience. Further, in adult professional education study abroad, Coryell, Spencer, and Sehin (2014) found that learning often occurred through problem-solving dialogue and collaboration in relationships with co-participants and instructors. However, research in study abroad largely focuses on the benefits such as exposure to other cultures, language proficiency, personal growth, and increasing self-confidence (Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Freed, 1998; Henthorne, Miller, & Hudson, 2001), and not so much on investigating the power and influence of relationship building on adult learning, particularly in graduate level study abroad programs.

Methodology

This research was conducted as a case study. Case studies are bounded explorations that investigate situations by analyzing behavior patterns, interactions, or contextual structures (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993). Given our interest in interaction and relationship, our research is framed by situated learning, and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This framework recognizes that people learn through social interaction, emphasizing the influence of relationships with other community members and acquisition of certain skills, standards, and behaviors the community values. As such, researchers framing their investigations with this theory often analyze the nature and characteristics of learning through participatory interaction within the community.

Participants

Participants ranged in age between 25 and 60 and hailed from a variety of backgrounds, race/ethnicities, motivations, and work experiences. Nine of the ten registered students participated in the study. Students were all enrolled in adult education graduate programs; seven were doctoral students, and two were master's level students. There were five women and four men. International experience varied from a few having never travelled internationally to ex-military members and others who had journeyed and worked abroad extensively.

Study/Course Context

The learning goal of the course was to acquire an amplified vision of one's own, of the Italian, and of the global context of adult life and education today, and to enhance knowledge and sensitivity to analyze and reconsider the future of adult education. The context of the course included pre-departure readings including texts on intercultural sensitivity, academic readings on modern Italian culture, and research conducted on study tours. Pre-departure meetings included information sessions, an orientation meeting, and two structured classes. In the class meetings, students discussed course readings and the course's comparative inquiry framework. This framework included the following questions in which participants first individually reflected upon their own responses and then engaged in world café style discussions (see www.theworldcafe.com for more information) to conclude collaborative responses to the inquiry questions. The inquiry framework consisted of the following questions:

- What is the purpose of Adult Education?
- How does learning in adulthood occur?
- What is knowledge and who owns it?
- What is the role/responsibility of the instructor?
- What is the role/responsibility of the learner?

The class then travelled to northern Italy for 8 days and was based at a university that confers masters and doctoral degrees in adult education. During the time abroad, participants engaged in scheduled cultural activities as well as two discussion-based

seminars with Italian graduate students and faculty in adult education from the local university. In the first of these sessions, the U.S. and Italian students learned more about the two educational systems from faculty presenters and then presented information about their own research projects. The second session was structured in world café discussions focused on the inquiry framework questions to identify similarities and differences present in adult education across the two cultures. Analysis of the individual and collective responses to the inquiry framework became the basis of the course's action research project designed ultimately to encourage the transfer of learners' new understandings from class to work and life practice. Throughout the course, the learners were asked to write a series of five prompted reflection blogs, three prior to departing for Italy, and two upon returning. The class met for a final time at the home university where students in small groups presented the findings of their action research projects.

Data Gathering

To investigate our research questions about the relational aspects of adult learning in graduate study abroad, we analyzed student blog postings. After reading the entire set of blogs, we identified two sets of postings in which participants most often discussed relationships and interpersonal interactions regularly in reflecting on their course learning and experiences. The first of these blogs was written and posted a week prior to departure, while the second blog was completed two weeks after returning from Italy. The prompts for these postings were,

Blog 3: In this blog posting, you are to first post your group's additional questions that were added to the inquiry framework for the action research project. Then, take a moment to examine your hopes and goals for your experience in Italy. Articulate what you hope to learn and your aspirations about how that learning will affect your understandings of yourself, of adult education, and of the world. This posting should be at least 1500 words. Your posting may contain pictures or other graphics to help tell your story.

Blog 4: In this blog posting, you are to reflect upon your experiences in the course and in your free time while in Italy. Be sure to respond at least to the following questions: What stood out to you as meaningful in your learning? What surprised you most? What relationships/interactions were helpful in your learning, and why were they so? Tell a story about a time where you learned something about Italian culture, intercultural sensitivity, adult education, and international study tours that expanded your thinking about your discipline and/or your life. This posting should be at least 2500 words. Your posting may contain pictures or other graphics to help tell your story.

These data comprised 48 pages of single-spaced text from the nine students who agreed to allow us to analyze their blogs.

Data Analysis

We began by reading and re-reading the postings multiple times to get a sense of the overall data set. These readings were coupled with a process in which we noted times when the participants discussed relationships, friendships, and social interactions related to their learning. These margin notes were then compiled to organize our coding process in which we looked for sensitizing concepts, “important features of social interaction” (Bowen, 2006, p. 3), that struck us as valuable in understanding characteristics of learning relationships, the contexts in which social interactions occurred, and the influence on learning that those interactions may have had. The participants’ postings were analyzed first as individual cases, and then subsequently further analysis took place across the postings to determine subcategories and ultimately overarching themes to answer our research questions. The following section offers a brief description of findings supported by the data. All names are pseudonyms.

Findings

Data analysis led to the identification of two overarching themes with respective categorical descriptions that we describe here.

Theme 1: Interpersonal Relationships in Graduate Study Abroad

“What I believe was the most meaningful to me in my learning was to feel a real sense of connection between us, the Italian PhD students and professor.” (Anna)

Anna’s quote above offers the essence of the importance our graduate student participants placed on the relationships formed and fostered in their study abroad program. We found that friendships and interactions, among the program’s students, as well as with Italians, were built throughout the experiences in the course. Characterized by the affective qualities of trust, safety, and emotional support, these friendships helped to buttress the participants’ learning in a foreign locale. We found that participants established deeper connections with other classmates with whom they had already known, as well as those whom they first met in the course. These relationships were described by being “open” (Grant, Eva) and important to how the participants felt about the course and their learning while abroad. Eva offered, “[I am] proud to say that I have forged new relationships and solidified current relationships with my cohort members.” Many specified how they “helped each other and shared resources [personal and educational]” (Maria) and highlighted the importance of having student colleagues who would look out for each other and assist when needed. Grant shared,

The relationships and interactions that were most helpful for my learning in Italy were with my classmates and professor... I feel these partnerships resulted in a high degree of support for me as a traveler and learner through our informal conversations, our openness, and our ability to share in each other’s excitement.

Another clarified, “the bonding [in the class] really helped make the entire experience more meaningful to me. . . . the bonding and friendships that have occurred within the program and on this Italy learning experience have become relationships that I will always cherish” (Maria). Ultimately, participants emphasized that those who took the class and embarked on the study tour offered a unique camaraderie that provided what resulted in a foundation of support, acceptance, and security during a learning experience abroad.

“I am certain I am not the only one who feels that the opportunity to share with Italian PhD students ...was one of the highlights of the experience.” (Anna)

Again, Anna’s sentiments exemplify the analysis across the students’ blogs. The respondents acknowledged the meaningful connections they made with Italian graduate students studying adult education during their activities at the Italian university. The U.S. students did not have a background in the Italian language nor much instruction in Italian beyond a few basic words. While they knew the Italian graduate students were attending their program in English, many took it upon themselves to learn more Italian independently as well. Cris, for example, who prepared a description of his dissertation study in Italian, offered,

I was proud of myself for learning Italian and pushing myself to speak in a language that was foreign to me. I think this interaction with the [Italian university] students also enabled us to create bonds of friendship. . . I feel like I have made connections with the students by sharing our research topics and where we are all currently on our doctoral journeys. I felt that we were able to connect not only at academic level, but also at a personal level as we talked about the challenges and successes that we have experienced so far.

Maria also spent time learning some Italian yet observed,

This Italian experience was extremely powerful to me, because even though we did not speak the same language, we actually DID speak the same language. It was the language of education, the language of the ideologies reflected in ideas of high participatory classes, true engagement of students and teachers, of education as the opportunity to explore the world and explore one’s self, of the evolution of methodologies to better teach and better learn.

Others explained how much they enjoyed noting differences and identifying similarities as they discussed their programs and research. Anna offered, “I really enjoyed speaking and collaborating with the students from the university. Despite having different specific goals we all seemed to share the same ideals, how can we improve education, in one way or another.” Charles expressed, “I also had the opportunity to speak with Claudia, who was also equally compelling and fascinating. The old adage that the world is a small place certainly held true in terms of Claudia’s experience and my own.”

Reflection on these experiences was encouraged throughout the course, as well as requested in their blog postings. The dialogue that occurred in the seminars, however, was certainly not always comfortable. Anna's self-reflection provides an example of this. She posited,

I usually think I am culturally respectful and empathetic, but during our session I might have made a wrong assumption (as most assumptions are!). In this case it was about Giada. When she sat with us on the table, she kept making faces that might have been read as signs of a certain annoyance. She kept talking to Paolo, and the other Italians, and kept looking around with a certain uncomfot. It felt as if she did not want to be there. Later, during our conversations in smaller groups, I realized Giada had a very basic level of English and felt really annoyed at the fact that she was unable to express herself, or understand what we were saying. I could really understand her uncomfot, and once I understood what was wrong, we were able to integrate her and translate in a different way. By trying to speak her language, I wanted her to see we were also making an effort to get close to her, and not only expecting her to get close to us. I believe the very bad Italian made her feel more comfortable with her not so advanced English! It was wonderful, because she then started asking tons of questions to us, and got really engaged in the conversation.

Anna also offered these sentiments, which may explain how adults from different countries, cultures, and programs could engage in dialogue so quickly, "I felt that even though there were obvious cultural differences and language barriers, there was a very strong common ground, which made our deeper conversations possible." Ultimately, across the data set the interactions with the Italian students were often portrayed as "friendly, interested, and inquisitive" (Ian), "helpful", and "open" (Eva). There was a definite determination to develop a fellowship with the Italian students, and vice versa; this resolve was evident in communications that utilized languages, gestures, and common educational interests and experiences. Cross-cultural interactions were clearly essential in the overall learning experiences for our participants.

Theme 2: Learning Outcomes from Relational Encounters in Graduate Study Abroad

Two categories of learning outcomes that related specifically to the relational interactions of our participants include (1) enhanced understandings about the field of and research in adult education, and (2) new perceptions of both Italian culture and one's own culture derived from informal learning outside of structured academic activities. In the first category, student research presentations, faculty presentations on educational systems in the two countries, and the world café conversations were cited as opportunities for interpersonal exchanges. These interactions led to new and nuanced conceptions of how the discipline of adult education is defined and practiced in Italy. Further, these activities prompted reflection on the participants' own understandings of the field. Charles suggested, "The discussions on teaching technique in terms of the adult learner for Italy versus the US were similar in theory but differed quite a bit in technique." Ian added,

In many ways, a more practical approach to adult education is its direct application to economic issues and skill deficiencies; I am happy for the broader perspective [our] program has provided me, but I was reminded there is a very real need for a focus on implementation and delivery, without which the theory has little meaning.

These interactions also offered time for participants to engage in discussions about each other's research projects, which included discussions with the Italian students on "methodologies and study designs" (Cris), as well as the purposes of adult education. Beth, in a conversation about research with an Italian student learned that "the idea of adult education for a facilitator or instructor is newer to their system [of education/training]." In addition, Ian explained, "My impression of our Italian university counterparts is their orientation towards adult education is more vocationally and socially focused while our orientation is broader and more theoretical." As well, Charles presented these conclusions, "the World Café interaction expanded the learning and certainly highlighted the global learning opportunities available as adult learners." Having the opportunity to talk at length with the Italian students about adult education and research in Italy offered the opportunity for the U.S. participants to reflect on their previous perceptions of their fields and research, and expand their understandings about the influences of culture on adult education.

We know that learning does not always occur in a classroom, and that is certainly the case in adult study abroad (Coryell, 2011). Indeed, free time interactions in the foreign city constituted many of the meaningful learning experiences that our participants related in their blog reflections. These experiences were times for observing and engaging with Italians and classmates, and these experiences became opportunities to learn about Italian culture and reflect upon one's own cultural expectations and actions in a foreign community. The data were rife with participants' enhanced insights into several behaviors, values, and principles of Italian and U.S. cultural influences and perspectives. While some of the experiences out of class were with the Italian students they met, others were with individuals encountered in cafés, at the *residenza* in which the students were housed, in the train station, or simply walking in the town. An example is Cris' description of his experiences in cafés,

My interactions with the locals at the different cafés were essential in learning the Italian culture... Ordering coffee was almost an art. I observed how the locals would order coffee and how they would interact with the barista or the wait staff. I tried to emulate these actions, successfully most of the time, and try to be cognizant of the dos and don'ts of the Italian culture.

Many participants were interested in "blending" in with the culture, as well as understanding some of the important etiquette expected in public settings. Additionally, the participants often found opportunities to reflect on their own culture and social interactions while engaged with others outside of class activities. Beth clarified,

Despite not knowing the language the attempt [to speak Italian] seemed to please people. I learned that if you at least start with hello and ended with thank you that people were receptive to your request. I will make more of an effort at learning a language of a foreign country if I am to travel there. We as Americans expect people to speak to us in English when they come to visit, so I believe that we should make the same attempt.

Attending to cultural mores and behavioral expectations that may be different from one's own was a strong thread across the data. Anna offered "I feel like as individuals, we were very aware of the image we were projecting of ourselves, and we were careful on how we were perceived." However, she acknowledged that when they were together in a larger group of classmates outside of class, they would somehow more easily disconnect with their surroundings. In fact, many of the participants discussed times when they ventured out on their own, and how meaningful those occasions were for them in their learning about Italy, the pulse of the city, and the activities and interactions of the locals.

Discussion and Implications

Analysis of the blogs provided useful insights regarding the relational aspects among adults within the CoPs (communities of practice) in a study abroad program. The community of practice within this program can be characterized as existing within the context of the study tour course with the U.S. participants, as well as expanding to include the Italian town and university community once in-country. Throughout the blog data, students discussed the important benefits and the role relationships played in their learning in this community. The shared domain of interests (Wenger, 2009) among the U.S. and Italian students aided the strong and swift development of social-academic interactions. In describing the community of the course, itself, participants often mentioned the comradery present in the group; everyone helped each other and looked out for one another. Furthermore, interactions across the two student seminars allowed our participants to better place their own research interests within the broader, international field of adult education. Additionally, discussions between U.S. and Italian students often led to unique ways of viewing adult education as a field of study and may lead participants to consider new methods of addressing issues within the discipline. The connections built among the students allowed for candid conversations and authentic learning from one another.

Implications for practice suggest that study abroad program designers should ensure that time to share research interests and perspectives for graduate students from both countries is included in the course design. These structured activities are ideal for the initial contact between the two groups of students, as these events can serve as the foundations of relationship development by allowing students to connect and identify shared interests.

Our participants also enjoyed partaking in various non-academic activities together, such as sharing a coffee or a meal together in local cafés. They also took pride in the relationships that were built and developed while participating during free time abroad. As the relationships among the U.S. students grew, the level of comfort and safety began

to rise within the group, which subsequently provided space for our participants to develop trust and safety outside the “home student” community to include others from the foreign locale.

Corresponding with studies by Dirkx, et al. (2010) and Coryell (2011), a common theme across our data was the rich learning that occurred through engagement with locals in the host city’s public spaces. Casual exchanges, observations, and conversations provided opportunities for participants to enhance their knowledge of the northern Italian culture and to attempt to assimilate, or at least be more sensitive to, the Italian culture more quickly. As such, we recommend that program designers allocate ample free time for students to explore on their own, as well as to collaborate with one another and with people from the local community. Adult students in study abroad are more self-directed in their learning choices (Coryell, 2011; 2013) and will often use their free time to continue their learning in meaningful ways. Our findings add to the literature by suggesting a concerted focus on the relational and cross-cultural learning benefits of scheduled free time in these programs, which allow students to utilize each other as resources in their academic and cross-cultural development. To foster relationships, we recommend that graduate study abroad instructors must not only design free time into the course design, but also allow students to have some autonomy over various aspects of the trip, such as with whom they travel, where they engage with the local community, and when some activities take place. These student choices may support relationships to develop organically as students with similar interests will stay together and continue to bond.

Finally, an important aspect to adult study abroad is structured reflection (Coryell, 2013). Our study’s findings reiterate that program designers must create opportunities for reflective activities to assist graduate students in processing learning experiences that occur both inside and outside the classroom abroad. In the program under study in this research, blogs allowed time for our participants to reflect critically on academic content, cultural interactions and perspectives, and insights gained because these assignments provided a space for students to process both positive and negative experiences. These blog postings also gave learners an opportunity to show gratitude to their fellow classmates and share how helpful everyone had been, thus further building relationships.

While this research is limited in that it reports only the preliminary findings of our study, we intend to further the investigation by conducting in-depth interviews with the participants to analyze their preliminary motivations for learning in the program, and the relationship those motivations had on the social/relational learning that occurred. Our hope is that future research, ours and that of other scholars, will continue to investigate adult learning in graduate study abroad to include research on relational learning in these programs. Further research in this area will provide additional insight into effective facilitation and instructional methods in fostering enhanced understandings of graduate student research development, the academic discipline, and international, cross-cultural adult learning and knowing.

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