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Reflections of a lifelong learner teaching in Italy

Michael Kroth

Abstract

This article describes and summarizes the author's experience of teaching in Italy for three months and the impact it had on him and his learning. The author, at the age of 61, lived in Italy for three months and here he reflects on what he learned and how it relates to adult learning theory concepts.

Early morning on my 61st birthday I boarded a plane from Boise, Idaho headed to Torino, Italy. I returned three months later a different-same person. I spent the time teaching for a studies abroad program but also learning, not only about some of the treasures Italy holds for the inquiring mind and artistic spirit, but also about myself. The purpose of this narrative is to reflect upon my experience as a lifelong learner teaching abroad.

Two planes later and approaching Torino many hours hence I wondered about my new adventure. I did not know the Italian language, though I had tried to learn some words and grammar via online phone apps and hastily purchased books that promised me I would learn Italian quickly. Perhaps those guarantees held true for others, but I still doubted how well I would be able to just get around town, much less the country. I did not even know the word for ticket without looking it up on my phone app. How would I buy one? I wondered how my health would hold out. After two heart surgeries I felt reasonably healthy but I knew little of the Italian healthcare system or how to access it. How would I be able to cope if something happened? My wife Lana, who was to visit me for five weeks, had had even more significant health problems. What would I do if something were to happen to her? These and other questions assailed me until I stepped off the plane, found my luggage, and stepped out into the sweltering Torino day. Let the adventure begin!

My Purpose – Intentionally learning about the world and myself

Sometimes transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) comes to us unexpectedly – it happens to us – and sometimes we are intentional about putting ourselves into situations that might be transformational (Kroth & Boverie, 2009). Here I purposefully put myself into a situation that would challenge me. Over my lifetime I had traveled internationally very little. I grew up in Kansas for goodness sake. I approached my trip to Italy as I often approach life - let it come and I will figure it out along the way. I knew that Italy has a history which includes martyrs and heretics, saints and sinners, places and art of unfathomable beauty, and a conflux of military history, culture, commerce, art, and religion. I was drawn there because of the questions I had about myself, because of my own unease about what I wanted to be doing with my life, and the need to look, I thought, at life from new perspectives. I was also ready to see beauty. Though I might not have articulated it this way at the time, I think I was drawn there because I am, at heart, a romantic idealist, and that part of me had been languishing in recent years as I'd looked on the world with more practical, perhaps more jaundiced, eyes. I needed to be inspired again whether or not I had a transformative learning experience and Italy seemed the perfect convergence of all this mix going on inside of me.

On a practical note, my writing and research interests were being drawn toward the study of irreverence. Through much of my life I have had an irreverent wit and a searching soul. I remember questioning the Viet Nam war in my high school political science class. My favorite book, the one that has had perhaps the most profound effect on me over a lifetime, was Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Reading this book, which satirized war during a major war, was like reading page after page of important insanity. I have since come to believe irreverence is one tool for those without power to question those with influence and existing ideological and social structures. While in Rome I made a point to have my picture taken with Giordano Bruno's statue in the Campo de' Fiore piazza. Bruno was a heretic burned at the stake by the Inquisition. Those perceived as irreverent are usually at risk for questioning the accepted knowledge of the day.

At the same time, though I did not realize it when I was planning to visit Italy, I was also open and ready for a spiritual experience. My spiritual journey had begun as early as the prototype little white country church where my grandparents took us each summer Sunday to pray and to sing "The Old Rugged Cross", and had continued as recently as a few weeks before the trip, when my friend Dave Player taught me about meditation. He gave me three books at that time, two of which I read nearly every day while on my Italian saga. The day I landed in Italy I was open and ready for a transformative learning experience as Mezirow and others have described (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991), but I did not anticipate that I would be adding spirituality to my irreverence research agenda. I should not have been surprised, as I'd written before (Kroth & Boverie, 2000), that one's life mission can be transformed over a lifetime.

Italy drew me toward her. Where better to think about issues of irreverence than a place where artists stretched the bounds of acceptability to create masterworks? Where better to think about issues of reverence than a country in which the natural beauty of the land is juxtaposed with astonishing human-created beauty?

Finally, I wanted to teach in a new situation. Though I love to teach, I looked at myself and found myself wanting. After teaching mostly online classes for

several years I longed to see real human beings in a classroom. Also, I knew that teaching undergraduate students with an average age well below the graduate students I normally teach would force me to reconsider the routine I'd fallen into. I entered Italy eager to teach.

What Happened

While in Italy I visited Venice, Rome, Milan, Cinque Terra, and Florence and of course I lived in Torino for three months. Most surprisingly, I was not prepared to fall in love with the churches. I am not a Catholic and have never considered becoming one, yet I was perhaps most moved by the churches I visited. There were the famous ones like the Vatican and the Duomo in Florence and St. Mark's Basilica in Venice. I was not prepared to be overwhelmed with emotion and inspiration and awe each time I entered one of those holy places but I was. Perhaps more surprising to me were the emotions I felt when visiting the smaller, lesser known churches like La Sacra di San Michele (St. Michael's Abbey). Even the ones in smaller towns are historical and something to behold. In Italy the churches are open all the time so on my last evening in Torino I decided to go downtown and enter every church I came across instead of visiting palaces or museums or eateries. I spent the evening doing that, visiting churches I had been to before and wanted to see again and also churches that just happened to be on my route. Those visits that evening, and not palaces or museums, remain my last memory of Italy.

I also, not surprisingly for most people, fell in love with the art. I have always appreciated art but have rarely felt art was something that touched my soul. Perhaps it is because I am colorblind and in the back of my mind I had written off art because I knew I could only experience artworks incompletely. Perhaps it is because I have always loved the performing arts to the exclusion of the fine arts. Here one sees masterpieces regularly and I was smitten. I perhaps fell most hard for Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican, but the sheer amount of remarkable art – which depicts not only human and natural beauty but also the human experience - the tragedy and triumph of war and the church and relationships and more – was almost overwhelming. Like the churches I visited, the art I saw opened up

channels of transformation – cognitive, emotional, and spiritual – that are available to us.

Perhaps what I enjoyed the most was the daily engagement with Italy. From my apartment it was a short, five-minute walk to school. I started most mornings by going across the street to a “bar”, drinking a cappuccino, eating a brioche, sometimes drinking a sprumata and having light conversation with the proprietors, who came to know a little about me and me about them. I would continue through the day emerged in the locale and often finish with a gelato sold by the friendly owners of a gelateria just a couple of blocks away. I always did my best to communicate in Italian and though my skills were poor the people were always helpful and I think appreciated my earnest attempts to speak in their language.

Regarding my teaching practice, I had hoped this experience would energize me and it did. My students were wonderful and teaching them was a highlight of my own learning experience. I taught two courses and in each I was reminded of why I had wanted to teach in the first place. Having the ability to teach abroad to these students was motivating and refreshing.

I continue to be an advocate for online learning and teaching. It is a rich source of learning for both my students and me, and it is where a good percentage of the significant global learning experiences will occur in the future. But I also came back committed to finding new venues – new physical places – to facilitate adult learning. I realized that I need to get out from behind a computer and more into the world. That is a big part of what adult learning and education is all about, after all, and I have been missing a chunk of it. I fully anticipate I will be doing more face-to-face work over the next few years.

My wife and I had never travelled for extended periods of time, and not internationally, in our three and a half decades of marriage. I did not know how this experience would turn out, but in fact it made me appreciate, love, and enjoy being with her more than ever. We struggled together to learn how to get around, how to manage the quotidian activities of shopping in a foreign language or how to communicate with salespeople just to get a phone to work, but that just gave us the opportunity to learn together in new ways. And

we experienced visiting St. Peter’s square in Rome and seeing the new Pope, holding hands eating a gelato each night on the way home to our apartment, and contemplating extraordinary art like Michelangelo’s statue of David. Italy was a place we learned and experienced together, never to be forgotten.

On a differently profound level, I left for Italy hoping to learn about the country and about myself. About myself I learned that I could confidently and contentedly spend time by myself in a place that was outside my experience. I learned that I have a thirst for a more spiritual life. I learned a deep appreciation for the fine arts. About the country I learned just a smidgeon of what there is but so much more than I ever knew before. It was enough to engage my imagination and to broaden my perspective.

For some reason I took few notes in my journal during my stay. I consciously had decided not to blog about my experiences. It was almost as if I did not want to record my thoughts and activities while there, did not want to engage the cognitive, rational me, preferring to let the experiences ferment and simmer. I did take pictures and when I look back on those I can be filled with emotions of all types. Looking back, not journaling seems a strange approach for a writer and a missed opportunity, but I can only think that deep inside I wanted this experience to be less about thinking and more about being, less about trying to figure it out and more about experiencing. That is the only rationale I have for it.

The Learning Process

It has been a year since I left for Italy. I am back into the flow of work and the normalcy of my life. As I reflect, I can situate my learning in both andragogical and transformative learning, and also in spirituality.

Andragogically, if ever Knowles’ assumptions (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) were validated it was on this trip. Those assumptions, followed by my experiences, are:

Adults need to know why they need to learn something before learning it.

For the most part, daily life informed me about what I needed to learn. The “why” was usually practical and initiated by a problem to solve - how to communicate, order food, find the right bus, or pay a bill. I was fortunate to also have wonderful staff from the studies abroad program who shared with all of us what we needed to know about Italy and why it was important to know.

The self-concept of adults is heavily dependent upon a move toward self-direction.

This entire experience began and continued self-directedly. A colleague of mine had taught abroad and that opened my mind to the possibility. Talking with her I realized I could do it and she encouraged me. Once in Italy, though we had suggestions from the program staff and some field trips, the choices of where to go, what to learn about, and what to experience were entirely mine. My wife and I planned trips and excursions for when she was there, and I decided on everything else after she returned to the United States.

Prior experiences of the learner provide a rich resource for learning.

I had travelled little internationally before this experience so I had little to draw on from those experiences. I knew little of the fine arts. After I arrived I realized my knowledge of the country was extremely limited. I had read a fair amount about the Catholic Church but, again, I discovered once there how little I knew. So in many ways I entered my Italian experience with what Suzuki calls “a beginner’s mind” (1970) and perhaps that is why every day seemed like an adventure.

Adults typically become ready to learn when they experience a need to cope with a life situation or perform a task.

Practicalities such as trying to buy the right train ticket or to order food assured that I was ready to learn, just for my own survival. I was ready to learn the language, about the culture, and what the bidet in my apartment was for.

Adult orientation to learning is life-centered; education is a process of developing increased competency levels to achieve their full potential.

I voluntarily took two Italian language courses when living in Torino and the reason was mostly practical. I audited both courses. I wanted to be able to immerse myself in the culture of the country as best I could and to interact independently. Admittedly, in my short stay that immersion was superficial, just skipping over the water, but learning the language was a choice that had nothing to do with degrees or grades.

The motivation for adult learners is internal rather than external.

This entire experience was almost entirely intrinsically motivated. There was no extra money to be made from it, in fact it cost me several thousands of dollars. There was only minor recognition and little short-term career advancement involved. I was motivated to learn something new, to meet different people, to experience a different culture, and to develop as a person. I also wanted to use the experience to deepen my emerging research agenda around the topic of irreverence.

(The assumptions are found in Figure 7-2: Worksheet for andragogical learner analysis, p. 159)

I have briefly described elsewhere (Kroth & Cranton, 2014), how I experienced transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) during my trip. I learned about the country, art, history, religion, and myself while I was in Italy but I did not feel until the very end of my trip the kind of insight that began to transform the beliefs I have about myself and my own purpose in life. It was a remark from a friend that started me to think about how teaching and spirituality might play out in my life and give it a new purpose. That remark was what Mezirow calls a “disorienting dilemma” and it opened up my thinking to possibilities I had not considered. How that will play out over the rest of my career and life remains to be seen, but since I have returned to Idaho I have continued to explore that juxtaposition of spirituality and

teaching/training, and what that might mean for my own life's work.

Perhaps the best way to describe my spiritual journey comes from the work of Elizabeth Tisdell (2003). She describes spiritual development as "the great spiral" (p. 93), which is a process of "standing in the present moment and spiraling back to explore significant events and spiritual experiences that shaped both one's spiritual journey and life journey and identity thus far in order to move forward to the future" (p. 94). This involves ongoing identity development and the ability to live more authentically.

I have moved through this spiritual spiral over six decades, moving at times toward religion and spirituality, at other times questioning my beliefs and moving away. It was interesting, but in Italy I don't recall reflecting on my religious beliefs as much as basking in the feelings of awe, wonder, and mystery brought from the tragedy, heroism, failure, purity, weakness, strength, bad luck, good fortune, symbolism, light and darkness that were found in the museums, churches, palaces, in their art and in their history, seemingly everywhere I went. So I was filled with this "that-which-cannot-be-described" feeling of reverence and a wanting to experience more and to contribute more and to be grateful for more.

It was not until after I returned from Italy and started to think about and to talk about my experiences and to journal about them that I began to realize that my personal and scholarly agenda had expanded. For now I realize I am not only on a journey to understand irreverence, but also one to understand spirituality. Further, I want to know the relationship of reverence and spirituality to irreverence. I think part of the relationship revolves around questioning and seeking deeper and more authentic truths, around inquisitiveness concerning the mystery of what we know, can know, and can never hope to know in our lifetimes. We shall see.

What Does It All Mean for Readers?

I hesitate to take my anecdotal experience and try to generalize what others might find meaningful. Each person will make their own interpretation. Perhaps some readers will resonate with a couple of insights about myself I took away from the experience.

One thought is really a reinforcement of something I already knew. I do not believe in the cliché, "It's never too late to..." do whatever. Even though it is a hopeful thought, especially for people like me who are getting up in years, the truth is that it does become too late to have a decent chance of achieving some goals and others do get beyond our reach. Our bodies become too creaky. We take on or are given responsibilities from which it is extremely difficult to disengage. The world changes and the opportunity disappears. Any of these situations and more can preclude us from taking on and achieving goals we may have.

But I now believe more than ever that it is too easy to assume that some things are too late to pursue when in reality they are not. At the age of fifty-nine what were the odds that I would one day live in Italy for three months? By sixty-one I had done it. Accomplishing that might have become nearly impossible just a month, a year, or five years later. I am so glad I pursued my trip when I did rather than sitting around twiddling my fingers and then living with regret because the opportunity had passed. It was good to re-find that I could achieve something this important if I put my mind to it. While some things can become unattainable there is far more within our ability to grasp than we often think.

My second insight is really just a corollary to the first one. I knew I wanted to make the next phase of my life – professionally and personally – productive, meaningful, and enjoyable. I didn't want to just go through the motions heading toward retirement and older age. By deciding to put myself into a situation where I could experience something likely to broaden and deepen my perspective I gave myself an opportunity to do that. More importantly, I am approaching the future more positively and proactively than before. I can be intentional about moving toward a future, even though I don't know where it will take me. And that is exciting to think about.

The Future

I am writing this on my birthday, a year after the day I landed in Torino and ten months after I flew back to Boise. The time has flown too, and I am nostalgic for Italy. I don't know if I will ever return. I feel a resonance with this country. I have changed, but I am still basically

who I am. I have “spiraled”, as Tisdale (2003) calls it, closer to a sense of spirituality and, I think authenticity. I have no doubt I will continue the spiraling process to the end of my life. I have picked up a new purpose and where that leads me I do not know. I have developed a broader research agenda – I now want to know about how to think about reverence and irreverence non-dualistically, as one might a koan or paradox. I want to know more, however, not just from a cognitive perspective but also from an emotional, physical, and spiritual perspective what it means to be in the center of that question and to experience, whether sitting in front of a painting or on my front porch, the fullness of the moment, just as I did during that space of time across the ocean.

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Michael Kroth is an Associate Professor at the University of Idaho in the Adult/Organizational Learning and Leadership program. He has written or co-authored five books including *Transforming Work: The Five Keys to Achieving Trust, Commitment, and Passion in the Workplace* (2001), with Patricia Boverie; *The Manager as Motivator* (2006); *Career Development Basics* (2009), with McKay Christensen; and *Managing the Mobile Workforce: Leading, Building, and Sustaining Virtual Teams*, with David Clemons. *Stories of Transformative Learning* (2014), co-authored with Patricia Cranton, is his latest book.