PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING

**City as Text © applied to an honors study abroad program:
Exploring Madrid**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss, evaluate, and illustrate the experiences of a City-as-Text © exploration in partial fulfillment of the requirements of an honors study abroad program in Spain. First, the nature and procedures of City as Text © as a learning tool are explained, followed by a list of necessary conditions for its application. Then the honors college in question is introduced, along with its special study abroad programs, and the experiences of various explorations are discussed and evaluated.

Nature of City as Text ©

City as Text © is a bottoms-up learning process. Developed by the National Collegiate Honors Council's Honors Semester Committee (Braid and Long, 2000), it expands on Kolb's (1981, 1984) concept of experiential learning. According to Kolb, successful learners possess four different kinds of ability: Concrete-experience abilities (immerse themselves fully, analytically, and without bias into new situations), reflective-observation abilities (assimilate new experiences from a transdisciplinary perspective), abstract-conceptualization abilities (integrate different and perhaps conflicting observations into a cohesive network), and active-experimentation abilities (apply the abstract concepts of such network to make decisions and solve problems). When experience plays a major role in the learning process, these abilities are heightened with the acquisition of new skills that help images and conclusions remain longer and more vividly in students' minds (Braid, 2000).

More often than not faculty members include among their teaching responsibilities mapping the route (i.e., conceiving reality) for students to follow in their quest of mastering their chosen discipline. In coordination with textbooks and assigned readings, professors define terms, lay out standards of ethics and aesthetics, establish cause-effect relationships, postulate and prove theorems, identify diagnostic criteria, explain theories, evaluate alternative methodologies, and assess the relevance and applicability of their conclusions. Notwithstanding instructors' repeated calls for originality and critical thinking; students in general are allowed little room within which they can deviate from established norms and practices. In the end, students are rewarded for discovering and learning what faculty members want them to discover and learn. This is essentially how top-down learning processes function; education is designed for, and revealed to, students whose role is limited to being passive recipients of knowledge.

Conversely, City as Text © seeks to provide a setting for students to influence their own educational experience and participate at all levels. Instead of merely following the route mapped by their instructors, students are encouraged to construct their own maps (i.e., their own conception of reality) and negotiate their path through it, discerning along the way how the area has been mapped in the past, and is likely to be mapped in the future, as well as in other areas, from the prism of different needs and purposes. Learning then becomes true discovery and not just recapitulation.

Daniel (2000) identifies four basic principles that must exist for this mechanism to be meaningful. First, active or experiential learning is essential, in such a way that the student, not the professor, is the primary agent; this principle is congruent with the natural process of human cognition and the stages of human growth and development. Conceived in this manner, learning turns into an ongoing endeavor that yields levels of understanding in which students simultaneously are subject and object of observation. Second, the concept of text (i.e., the vehicle to learning) transcends books, libraries, and the internet and rotates around first-hand encounters with the area under scrutiny. Direct contact with buildings, people, institutions, noise, and everything else that can be experienced is a must. Third, critical examination and rational review are the only indispensable tools; thus, the process is free from the rigidity of external authorities that delineate arbitrary boundaries between right or wrong, true or false.

The fourth, and perhaps most important, principle stresses integrative learning, much along the tenets of cultural materialism (Elwell, 1991; Harris, 1979). A sociocultural system's structure, configured by its primary and secondary groups, is shaped by its infrastructure (i.e., availability of resources and physical constraints affected by climate, topography, and other geographical features), which determines the system's means of production (e.g., patterns of resource use, terminology of subsistence, work ethics, and interaction with the environment) and means of reproduction (e.g., patterns of fertility, mortality, migration, morbidity, mating, premarital and extramarital sex, care of children, contraception, abortion, and infanticide). The structure and the infrastructure interact with each other as society attempts to satisfy the needs and wants of its members and maintain secure, predictable, and orderly relationships by using the available resources. Out of this interaction emerges the system's superstructure, which encompasses behavioral and mental aspects. The behavioral deals with leisure and recreational activities, such as art, music, literature, rituals, sports, hobbies, and the role of science in assimilating perceptions, while the mental has to do with motives for human behavior, such as values, emotions, traditions, and goal-oriented rational action.

Since all aspects of the system are closely intertwined, a change in one aspect affects all others. Cultural materialism sees current institutions as ways in which society attempted in the past to satisfy a need and continues to satisfy it today, although perhaps in a modified form; if the need ever disappears, the institution will become obsolete and will likely disappear, too. Thus, in order to understand a sociocultural system, one must be aware of all components interacting with one another, for example, art and values (superstructure) responding to ways in which family and government (structure) cope with sexual taboos and pollution (infrastructure). This is the essence of transdisciplinary learning.

Application of City as Text ©

Viewed from the cultural materialism perspective, City as Text © consists of a structured exploration of a sociocultural system. Discovering the multiple relationships (i.e., mapping the route) among the system's components is crucial to creating and nurturing a cosmic view of the area under study. Students are divided into groups of four or five, and each group is assigned a unique area of a sociocultural system, usually a city. These groups should be as heterogeneous as possible in every way, such as gender, ethnic group, academic major, creative interests, and personality types, to name a few, to foster diversity of opinions and interpretation. Students from different backgrounds notice different traits from the same reality; sharing their perceptions with other members of the group leads them not only to acquire a broader picture of what they observe, but also gain awareness of their own blinders or filters through which they view the world. At the end of their exploration, as a group, they present their observations to the other groups which were assigned other areas. The idea is that the aggregate of experiences provides a more comprehensive and in-depth view of the sociocultural system than any person or group individually may obtain by replicating the exercise throughout all areas.

There are three basic strategies that each group should identify in the area assigned to it. The first is mapping, with a focus on buildings (housing and business patterns), points of interest (parks, monuments, historical and cultural sites), centers of activity (government services, buying and selling, recreation), and transportation routes (pedestrian, private motorized and nonmotorized vehicles, public transportation). This strategy involves recording how human-made infrastructure is used and how it was used in the past (residential deterioration, transformation of churches into restaurants, bicycle paths) or might be used in the future, consequences of traffic flows (jams, overcrowding, pollution), and nature of social and economic activity (concerts and plays, people enjoying their meals, drug peddling), among others. Normally, the significance of this strategy can be enhanced with books, articles, and websites of interest that provide factual information about the area under exploration.

The second basic strategy consists of observing details of the persons and things mapped in the first strategy. For example, one may seek to observe how people fit with the environment, so the following questions may seem pertinent: Does everybody belong in the picture or do some individuals appear to stand out of place? Are people alone or do they gather in groups, and, if so, are these groups large or small? Who talks to whom about what? Is any particular group (i.e., men or women, children or adults, businesspersons or tourists) predominant? Do people enter buildings and sites in the area or do they walk or drive by them? How are they dressed? Are they shopping, eating and drinking, relaxing, or engaged in business transactions? Do they seem to take good care of the physical infrastructure? What colors, if any, abound in the infrastructure? Students should be encouraged to look for the unexpected as well as the expected and open up their senses. One can observe not only by watching people and things but also by exercising other sensory perceptions–smelling (flowers, uncollected garbage, body odor), tasting (food and drink served by local establishments), and hearing (birds chirping, vehicle horns in heavy traffic, children playing).

The third strategy has to do with listening to what people have to say, and this only can be accomplished by conversing with, and asking questions to, as many persons as possible. For

example, one might ask specific questions regarding how people feel about the area being explored, the reasons why they go there, how often they visit, or perhaps broaden the inquiry to include more transcendental questions such as what truly matters in their lives, what worries them, how they feel about their places of work or study, what they consider the most serious challenges facing their country or region, the main socioeconomic forces influencing their daily decisions, political stability, philosophical issues, and so on. The important thing is to find out how people affect, and are affected by, their environment and the rituals and values they develop and maintain in this constant interaction.

One more condition for a successful City-as-Text © exploration is of paramount importance: Students' interests ought to transcend merely mapping, observing, and listening in their portion of town and include the ability to evaluate the perspectives from which they carry on these strategies. We all approach life situations with our own preconditions and biases; thus, the conclusions that we formulate are shaped not only by our perceptions but also by the lens through which we perceive them. Whether or not we identify beauty, conflict, pain, or hope in a building or a social gathering largely depends on previous personal experiences as well as socialization processes within different cultural segments. In other words, consciousness of one's judgment motives, tastes, and preferences is of the essence.

The Honors College at Florida International University

The academic setting for the City-as-Text © exploration discussed here is The Honors College at Florida International University (FIU). FIU is Miami's public research university and has approximately 950 faculty members and 38,000 students in two campuses. The Honors College is its elite unit, and some of the harshest critics refer to it as a refreshing oasis in the midst of mediocrity. The College brings together 45 of the best faculty members from a wide variety of disciplines and over 1,100 students of all academic majors to address the prime issues facing humankind throughout the ages. The focus is transdisciplinary, reaching beyond the traditional divisions of intellectual activity and encompassing numerous facets of human thinking and creativity. Students may pursue any major available in the University and simultaneously complete the Honors curriculum. In most cases, participation in The Honors College does not increase the number of credits required for graduation.

The Honors College has been conducting study abroad programs in English since 1994 and currently offers opportunities for its students in Spain, Italy, and Jamaica. These programs, scheduled during the summer, allow students to earn six semester credit hours, which is the equivalent of one year of study in The Honors College. The Spain program spans four weeks in May and covers representative angles of the country. Lectures, readings, and field assignments expose students to Spain's exciting history, contributions to the humanities, and role within the European Union, all leading to a better appreciation of the flavor of the land, the pride of its people, and its legacy to the world. One of these assignments is a City-as-Text © exploration of Madrid.

Exploring Madrid

The Honors City-as-Text © exploration of Madrid begins with the identification of four quadrants defined by the North-South Castellana/Recoletos/El Prado corridor and the East-West bound Alcalá street. The Cibeles Fountain Plaza, one of Madrid's best known landmarks, lies at the center of this partition. Four groups, each consisting of four or five students, are formed, and each group is assigned a quadrant (Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, and Southwest). The groups are configured to be as heterogeneous as possible with respect to gender, ethnic group, and academic interests. Students are instructed to pursue the mapping, observing, and listening strategies discussed above. For a larger class size, such as Summer 2007, consisting of approximately 30 students, the city may be partitioned into six areas, along the same North-South corridor intersected by the East-West bound José Abascal/María de Molina streets in the upper part of the city and Alcalá street in the lower part of the city; thus, the six areas assigned to students would be Northeast, Northwest, Centereast, Centerwest, Southeast, and Southwest.

The assignment is twofold. One aspect focuses on buildings, such as residential, businesses, government, churches, while the other aspect has to do with parks and monuments. A formal 30-45 minute oral report on the quadrant is scheduled to be presented by each group to the whole class while in Madrid, followed by a question-and-answer period. Pictures, maps, pamphlets, and other materials are encouraged, and each group is free to arrange its presentation, providing a minimum of three sites are covered by each assignment. In addition, a typewritten, approximately 12-15 page individual report is required about each assignment from every student within three weeks after returning from Spain. These reports should be reflective in nature, profiting from individual-specific academic skills; that is, an architecture major is expected, although by no means limited, to address the composition and style of the physical infrastructure; a social-science major would focus on ethnic composition and social structure; a business major would stress the volume and type of economic transactions, and so on.

When one puts together the individual perspectives reported both orally and in writing, a wonderful mosaic emerges. Each report contributes to a richer, more complete understanding of the city and its people, while maintaining the individuality of the intertwining pieces. The reports have in common certain patterns of in-depth reflection mixed with an open expression of feelings, and interpret the same reality in many ways like a prism refracts light in countless forms. For example, one student describes buildings vividly in an attempt to relate past and present, while adding a humorous touch, as follows:

> First we headed to Plaza Mayor, a large, rectangular space surrounded by a group of buildings. The buildings, also very rectangular and modular, almost made me feel a little claustrophobic in such an open area. The walls were so imposing–they seemed to reverberate the power of the Habsburgs, and even to a point the austerity of El Escorial. The one building to really catch my eye was the one covered in frescoes, which used to belong to the bakers of Madrid. Its cherubim and other lyrical characters in golden hues succeed in providing some warmth amid the other facades. I wonder if the bread they made was every bit as hard as it is today.

Another student focuses on the plaza's main statue, a monument, transcending its presence in search of reasons why it is there, the way it is:

> The first thing we visited was the monument of King Philip III, right in the middle of Plaza Mayor. It is a monument that screams authority, which is funny because that king didn't care much for responsibility. I suppose it is how [Queen] Isabel II wanted everyone to remember him, placing it right in the middle of the popular plaza and raising it up so high. Maybe it was to show everyone how powerful the rulers of Spain have been, and to declare herself every bit as important despite the fact that she was a woman.

A third student describes the physical infrastructure in a part of his/her quadrant only to provide a glimpse of the other, immigrant Spain that so few visitors experience. He/she uses in his/her allegory a famous painting by Goya depicting an ancient god ripping apart one of his children lest an oracle's prophecy be fulfilled. Evidently, the student stumbles into a "dangerous zone" and coalesces in his/her report building structures, mythology, and ethnic integration to convey his/her perception of reality and conjecture of the future:

> The first image shows a collection of buildings that are included in what appeared to be a low income area, made up of shabby residences and illegitimate businesses... This part of town shows the 'other' side of Madrid, the area that is not hospitable for tourists, the venues and stores not featured on TV or in magazines. With that in mind, it is not to say that this location is any less a part of Madrid than anywhere else. Though it might be a stretch to call the area 'Spanish' in any sense, one still gets the impression of being in Spain, because like in any large city, there are areas that do not fit neatly into the homogenized description of it, but still remains 'Spanish.' This impression of 'Spanishness' is attacked by the fact that while in these slums, one would be hard pressed to hear anyone actually speak Spanish... Each store and home kept its own identity... without interrupting or succumbing to the pressures around it... maintaining their identity within the whole of a larger identity, all of Spanish Spain...
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> One can also look at this maintenance of identity despite larger forces as a real life example of Goya's Saturn Devouring Child. While the concrete example is much less gory, it still tells the story of a larger power (Saturn or Spain) gorging/incorporating smaller entities (lesser deities or immigrant ethnic groups) into itself. Like the story in mythology, the children of Saturn do not die; they remain alive in his stomach, each distinct from the others and the father himself. One inconsistency between the two is found when the myth concludes by having Saturn murdered and the children in his stomach escaping to become the new gods. Though one might not expect the overthrow of the entire Spanish government, perhaps

the immigrants might raise their voices for better housing development plans. Saturn after all ate his children because he feared they would become more powerful than he. Maybe in this case the smaller groups can ease the anxiety of the larger Spain and work together toward goals that will assist both.

Probably influenced by their own experiences and the South Florida environment, where migrants abound, immigration and migrants' conditions are persistent themes that seem to intrigue students. Some choose to dwell on negative, dull features, as evinced by the following excerpt:

> ...The decay of the buildings is mirrored in the state of the park. Though the park had its share of slides and toys and colorful fences, not a single child was in sight... The impression was that this area was not a safe one, and that children were better off playing indoors or at school... Locals in the area were dressed in traditional clothing from their homeland, further emphasizing the immigrant history of Spain. Signs describing the park looked as though they were created by the city in order to liven the area. All the slides, swings, benches, and fences were painted in bright, eye-numbing primary colors... Now, though, it just makes the scenery all the more eerie. By juxtaposing the brilliant colors and the dark, somber faces of the people at the park, one notices much more how the blues and yellows fail miserably at the task of trying to make the park more friendly.

Others recognize migrants' capability, in fact, likelihood, through self-discipline and hard work, to rise in triumph over adversity, perhaps in testimony of their parents' or even their own experiences:

> The next monument we came across [in the immigrants' quarters] was that of Agustín Lara, a Mexican composer... The location of this monument is very strategic. It is placed right in front of the library, as if to say to the immigrants that they, too, are capable of accomplishing great things in Spain; the perfect place to continue their education is through those doors.

Then there are ubiquitous comparisons of infrastructure, activities, and lifestyles between Spain and the United States. One student writes:

> Although Miami has its share of parks, none remotely compares to those found in Madrid. Aside from being different in character, the parks in Madrid are more abundant. Differences include cleanliness, landscape, sort of people in them, and perhaps most striking of all, function. The parks of Miami are dirty, poorly landscaped, and for the most part inhabited by vagrants. The parks in Madrid are clean, filled with a variety of flora and fauna, and are used primarily by normal people as a place for relaxation.

In the end, students scrutinize the city and its people, analyze what they perceive, and draw their own conclusions, not only for purposes of writing their City-as-Text © reports, but as a way of learning and interpreting their surroundings on an ongoing basis. The entire experience is perhaps best summarized by one student in his/her journal (another course assignment) entry for the day of oral presentations, as follows:

> City-as-Text oral presentations were today, and I must say I'm really glad to get it out of the way. All the groups were really worried and nervous, but all in all, I think the presentations were exceptionally informing and insightful. While I had already learnt a lot about Eastern Madrid, the entire western side remained obscure. Today's presentations really allowed me to get to know Madrid much better. While two weeks wasn't enough to see every place in the city, I was able to see it through the eyes of my classmates. I know about the lower income end of Madrid, where many immigrants live, and the stories and history of the area, such as the library that was at different times a church and a hospital. I had the chance to know more about the business district, which is less residential but has many amazing, modern feats of architecture.

Every year the exploration is repeated. Findings and perceptions change, as students change, but the awe of discovery and the joy of experiencing direct contact with history, people, and culture keep emerging. Students enhance their ability to observe concrete situations, reflect on them, formulate abstractions, and relate them to other aspects of their lives. The images they capture and the conclusions they draw are likely to remain in their minds for a long time, if not forever. Their integrative skills are sharpened as they connect elements of Madrid's infrastructure, structure, and superstructure. And they come out of the program with the satisfaction of not only having learned about different aspects of Spain in general, and Madrid in particular, but acquiring this knowledge through their own critical examination and rational review.

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