

Chapter 7

Learning in Situ: Situated Cognition and Culture Learning in a Study Abroad Program

Kathy Marzilli Miraglia
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, USA

ABSTRACT

By examining the intersections of the critical and pedagogical theories of experiential learning, situated cognition and learning, communities of practice, and culture learning, this chapter examines how a short-term university sponsored summer study abroad art program in Italy addressed concerns for global citizenship and transformation, while implementing on-site courses in art history and painting. Students from a university art college traveled to Italy, studied within a community of learners, and practiced and applied their knowledge, techniques and skill to studio practices. Learning in situ, students constructed meaning from transformative encounters in this summer study abroad program in Italy.

INTRODUCTION

Rather than the acquisition of facts, situated cognition stresses higher order thinking and problem finding and solving as connected to real life situations. Situated cognition and learning seemed a natural fit in the design of the Italy study abroad program that was offered at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth from 2000 to 2013. Reflecting upon 13 years of experience in this study abroad program, design points, derived from the review of the literature, are discussed in this chapter with pedagogical recommendations to consider before planning a study abroad program. This chapter examines the theoretical foundations and the intersections between critical and pedagogical theories of experiential learning, situated cognition, communities of practice, and culture learning that were the underpinnings of the Italy summer art and culture study abroad program. The approach of integrating multiple learning theories in the design of the Italy program was a result of year-end reviews and program evaluation through student ratings, surveys, interviews, journals, and a members' check. Details of the program are discussed concerning how a holistic approach maximized the experience for students, concentrated on cultural immersion, and communities of practice. This approach allowed for intercultural interaction

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and personal transformation in keeping with the aims of advocating for global citizenship and participatory learning. This chapter also addresses the question: What do students learn in intercultural learning communities as part of study abroad programs?

Many universities promote and recommend that students participate in a study abroad program as part of a comprehensive education in their field of study and to acquire international knowledge (Institute of Educational Research, 2016). A study abroad program can be an opportunity for transformation and change while playing a critical role in global participatory learning. The expectation of studying in a country other than that of a student's origin, for a given length of time and beyond cultural enrichment, "is to develop a thorough understanding of theories, methods, and facts within a given disciplinary structure but also to contribute to responsible citizenship, understanding of cultural heritage, and reflections about values, concepts, and lifestyle..." (Opper, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990, p. 117). Study abroad programs differ in content depending on the field of study and the extent of which cultural experiences, activities, and learning are fostered and supported. For instance, "a visit to the museum plays a different role for an engineer than for an art historian" (Opper et al. 1990, p.118).

The Institute of International Education (IIE) initiated Generation Study Abroad, a national campaign to double the number of students who study abroad by the end of the decade. 298 American colleges and universities from 48 states participated in undertaking the expansion of study abroad programs with partners and participants to "encourage and track campus activities that expand diversity in race and ethnicity, academic disciplines, destinations, and gender of those who study abroad" (Institute of Educational Research [IIE], 2016). As reported in an annual statistical survey, *Open Doors 2014: A 15-Year Snapshot*, conducted by IIE (2014), the overall number of American undergraduates studying abroad for credit has more than doubled within the past 15 years. However, the percentage of all U.S. undergraduates that studied abroad was still under 10%, totaling 289,408 students in 2013. Short-term programs lasting eight weeks or less, usually in the January or summer terms, comprise 60% of all study abroad programs, mid-length programs, lasting a quarter or semester were 37%, and long-term programs of one year or longer were 3% of U.S. students studying abroad. The United Kingdom is the leading destination for American students, followed by Italy, Spain, France, China, Japan, India, and South Korea. Outside of Europe and Asia, American students also studied in Latin America, including Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and Chile, as well as Australia and Israel. IIE's President Dr. Goodman noted that:

International experience is one of the most important components of a 21st century education, and study abroad should be viewed as an essential element of a college degree. ... Learning how to study and work with people from other countries and cultures also prepares future leaders to contribute to making the world a less dangerous place. ... They [students] will need to understand the cultural differences and historical experiences that divide us, as well as the common values and humanity that unite us. (IIE, 2016)

Those universities that value civic engagement also encourage students to participate in study abroad programs focused on service learning. Many would agree with Assistant Secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs, Evan Ryan, who stated "International education is crucial to building relationships between people and communities in the United States and around the world" (Open Door Report, 2014.) Ryan also noted that there is a need to expand international study and provide more diverse locations, as it is through "international relationships that global challenges like climate change, the spread of

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