

EXL 300 (1 COURSE CREDIT)
CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING: THEORY & PRACTICE

SAMPLE STUDENT REFLECTIVE PAPERS



INSTRUCTOR: DR. ISHITA SINHA ROY

Associate Professor, Media Studies

Department of Communication Arts

Keeping Your Eyes, Ears, and Mind Open While Studying Abroad

By Ben Hedin (Costa Rica)

“American students who travel abroad cannot be expected to transcend historical, political, social, and global systems of power in order to become cross-culturally immersed “global citizens.” We can, however, be asked to become internationally conscious and self-aware American citizens who are responsible for thinking about those critical issues.”



After my experience in Costa Rica during the fall semester of 2010, this quote accurately summarizes the confusion of study abroad. When I left for Costa Rica, I had a vision of interacting with a family as if I was their son, buying food in open-air, crowded markets, and successfully interacting with the general population – all of which turned out to be very optimistic expectations. I was not really prepared for how much I would stick out. First, I was naïve about the fact that until we actually get to know someone, snap judgments prove are usually the only way in interpret the individual’s behavior. In my opinion, we stereotype people precisely because using these broad generalizations, we can, to an extent, ‘predict’ people and create order in unfamiliar situations. A very easy way to make this snap judgment is on the basis of race or ethnicity. The fact that I thought I could travel to Costa Rica and integrate into the culture, particularly overlooked the obvious fact that as an American Caucasian, I would stick out like a sore thumb. Unfortunately, I think the belief that we can ‘belong’ or fit into global cultures if we try, is a common misperception held by many Americans when they travel to other countries.



No doubt, the world is becoming more and more multicultural in terms of race and ethnicity, however Americans take pride in being unique and “going against the flow”, traits of an individualistic culture, and this makes it hard for them to sit back, observe, and let other cultures first accept them. Most other countries around the world value conformity and the shared ‘we’ feeling of a collectivist culture. Community accomplishments are placed before individual achievements in these cultures. This is best represented by a Japanese proverb, “the nail that sticks up gets pounded down.” This collectivist mindset poses a particular challenge for someone who dreams of becoming a “global citizen.” As American students in foreign cultures, we are immediately judged and treated on the basis of both our whiteness and our ‘reputation’ of being arrogant and culturally ignorant. Challenging this snap judgment and fully integrating myself in Costa Rican culture would require very hard work and observation, as I would soon learn.

I went to Costa Rica knowing very little Spanish and not much about Costa Rican culture. You might say this is a sign of American ignorance, I would mostly agree with you. I accepted my linguistic disadvantage because of the amazing ecosystems and great academic experience I would gain while abroad. My communication handicap became painfully evident though, in the early days of my home stay in a small farming community named San Luis. I had very limited Spanish skills. I had been taking Spanish for the past month at a cultural immersion school, yet was still very underprepared. I had been told that my family had hosted foreign students for many years but did not speak any English. Actually, the only English I heard from them during my month-long stay with them was, “Thank you”, “Cat”, and “Do you want coffee?” Their experience with other students must have prepared them well for a Spanish handicapped student such as me.

Surprisingly, my Spanish was the least of my troubles during my stay with them. Hand signals are universal; I had a dictionary, and I could ask their grand daughter who spoke some English if I REALLY needed to say something. Unfortunately there was no dictionary, website, or person I could ask about cultural norms, expectations, or Costa Ricans’ perceptions of Americans.

Most difficult for me was finding my role in the household, and I had an especially hard time adjusting to the laid-back pace of life in San Luis. This was very unexpected, coming from a culture that never has enough free time and where people are always rushing around. And I think this is exactly why it was hard to adjust -- I have never had this much free time and being in a foreign culture, I did not know how to fill it. I also had a hard time adjusting to and under-



standing the extended family structure in San Luis. On Fridays and Saturdays and typically one more day during the week, there was anywhere from five to ten family members over to eat lunch or dinner at my host family's house.

My home stay parents' daughter also lived right behind them in a house across from the coffee field. Constantly being surrounded by family was foreign to me, since in the U.S. personal independence is glorified and kids are almost expected to rebel against parents. Also, many of my friends' home stay parents were just a few years older than us and already had kids! The young age that Costa Rican children are expected to mature at amazed me. Getting married and having kids are common for young people in early twenties. This made me feel very immature throughout the whole semester. Costa Ricans have very different ideas of personal responsibility and independence. Children were allowed to romp through the forest without supervision, and my home stay parents never objected to me going anywhere. You were mostly free to do what you wanted. This independence came with an expectation though, that you and only you are responsible for your actions. Costa Ricans seem to typically not blame others for their misfortunes. For example, we went to hot springs with water slides that in the U.S. would probably be illegal. Yet no lifeguards or personal were watching to make sure people were okay, and no one was afraid of legal trouble because of the shared consensus that everyone took personal responsibility for their actions. Without knowing these cultural norms and how to respond in common situations, becoming a true local Costa Rican would take an enormous amount of observation and work. Nothing could have prepared me for these subtleties; the only way to learn them is through experience. After noticing these cultural differences, you realize that you have to act in accordance in order to overcome the snap judgments people make of you. This cultural accommodation is an incredibly long and tedious process that requires lots of hard work and observation.

This observation and behavior modification is a process that I noticed myself go through which resulted in my blending in more and feeling more a part of the culture. Granted, I said I felt like I blended in more, I was still almost a complete foreigner. As mentioned in the quote, the fallacy of global citizenship should be replaced with cultural and self-consciousness. Immediately after my arrival at my home stay house, I attempted to modify my behavior to act more as a part of the family rather than just a visiting student. The thing I was most adamant about was helping with EVERYTHING I was able to. At first my home stay parents seemed unsure if they should let me and often did not tell me when they were going out to do chores around the farm.



It seemed like they thought I was asking just to be polite. But I kept on asking them, “*puedo hablar en algo?*” which means, “can I help with anything?” Eventually they got the point. My home stay father would wait for me to milk the cow every morning and would frequently ask me if I wanted to pick coffee, plantains, chamote...etc. I was very proud that he was okay with me helping him and thankful that he had the patience to teach me. At the end of my time he told me that many students do not help as much as I did which I found mind-blowing. The point of a home stay is to become a part of the family and as I had seen in other families, people my age were very, very responsible or even had families! Because of this fact, I felt more responsible to help around the farm and rose to the occasion.

My family also treated me as special, and at times I felt like a tourist in their home. I would eat first, they would offer me more food, and for the first few days they even did my dishes. In my attempt to fit in, I would wait until they had food (sometimes for a while), ask for less food, and did my own dishes. I also found more traditional Costa Rican ways to fill my time. Rather than being on my computer or sitting in the corner of my neighbor’s field for the internet (the only place I could find it), I was constantly outside. Working on the farm, exploring the nearby woods, and reading were activities that filled most of my time. For the first time ever, I was on a minimal schedule that only included classes on only one day a week. The rest of the time was mine, and although I had to study and carry out an independent study, I became much more comfortable doing things on my own. I am very glad I have brought this newly acquired confidence back to the U.S.

Additionally, I tried to culturally fit in my everyday experiences. This was as intense as forcing myself out of my comfort zone and using my broken Spanish to talk to street vendors. This was difficult for me, but street vendors like when tourists make the effort to learn how to interact using local rules and the language. Cultural learning was sometimes as simple as being able to ask for the non-tourist price on beer at the bar, knowing what things on the menu meant, or knowing where to walk on the road. Finally, it also meant not being an obnoxious American. That really ticked me off, when you could obviously spot an American or hear them. Again, most countries are collectivist cultures, where stand-out behavior is looked down upon. Loud and ignorant Americans were embarrassing so I cannot even image how negatively they were viewed by Costa Ricans. Because I kept my eyes, ears, and mind open, I adopted some traditionally Costa Rican habits, some of which are still with me today. I attempted to be very self critical to try and modify my behaviors to fit in.



I was glad to be an Allegheny Ambassador and thought I did a pretty good job in not giving off the ignorant American vibe the whole time. I am also proud to be able to share my experience with others in the Allegheny College community and hopefully to inspire others to study abroad. Although I may never be a global citizen, I know I will never be an ignorant traveler and continue to be internationally conscious and self aware of my place as a traveler and guest of the world.



A Clash and Resolution among Two Cultures: The Kata Tjuta/Uluru Experience

By Julianne D'Amico (Australia)

We live it. We are surrounded by it. What is it? Culture refers to values, beliefs, attitudes, preferences, customs, learning styles, communication styles, history/historical interpretations, achievements/accomplishments, technology, the arts, literature, etc. – the sum total of what a particular group of people has created together, share, and transmit. Understanding culture does not simply mean knowing a list of values that a culture ‘has’. Culture is a system . . . The key to understanding culture is understanding the system of decision making – what value or rule comes out on top in specific situations. (41)

Studying aboard at James Cook University in Townsville, Queensland, Australia and specifically the three days spent discovering the secrets of Kata Tjuta and Uluru has shown me how



two cultures that have clashed in the past have negotiated an understanding of a ‘shared’ national culture to teach visitors how one can work towards building respect for difference and embracing this painful history in order to move towards a mutual resolution.

Waiting at the hostel, in Alice Springs, for The Rock Company to whisk me away on my three day adventure to Kata Tjuta and Uluru I was full of excitement to finally be able to see the world’s largest natural phenomena. Before the van arrived I met a woman whose first words to me were asking where I was from. I replied to her that I was from the United States but have been living in Townsville for the past five months and then proceeded to ask the same question to which she replied she was from Canada. At this time the van arrived and we sat next to each other while talking about our travels across Australia.

By the time we were on the road everyone who had come together was talking in quite whispers while those who had come alone started out the windows. After thirty minutes of this our tour guide Dave announced over the microphone that we would all take a turn at introducing ourselves to the rest of the van. There was a family from France and two couples from Scotland and one from Ireland, there was a pair of girls from Thailand and a pair of men from Germany, a man from Italy and one from Australia, a woman from Austria, another from China, and another from Italy and of course there was Mandy from Canada and myself from the States. After the introductions the van fell silent again, except for an occasional whisper from one of the couples, until we reached King’s Canyon. Throughout the first day I observed that beside Mandy and I becoming friends everyone else who traveled alone remained in their own thoughts while those who traveled together were reluctant to talk to anyone else other than the person they came with. That night while sitting around the camp fire there was more conversation but it was among those who shared a similar culture and not with anyone else.

The morning of the second day I took these two pictures after Mandy pointed out the scene taking place before us. The picture below on the left shows our group divided into those who share similar if not the same culture: since Paul was the only Australian man he stood by himself while the Germans, the Austrian, and the younger Scottish couple talked together, the two women in the back were from France and China only spoke for a few minutes. The picture below on the right is of Mandy and I, the only two people from North America.



On the second day we hiked around Kata Tjuta and walked a short trail along one side of Uluru. That night we watched Uluru change colors as the sun set behind us and on our drive back to the campsite we sang old American classics and continued our singing around the campfire until late into the night. It was this night alone which showed me that although we come from different countries and follow different cultures we can still forget about our past and come together as one unified entity where everyone has equal power and equal happiness.

According to the definition of culture clash, it is: “when one or more cultures are integrated into one environment, causing disruption and challenging contemporary traditions often occurring in multi cultural societies.” The last day of the trip was spent at Uluru itself. In the afternoon the day before we were told how Uluru came into Aboriginal ownership once again. The Aboriginal tribe who lived on the land originally owned the land before the Australian government claimed it for themselves (just like the first European settlers claimed Native American land upon their arrival in the New Country). The Australian government then declared Uluru a National Park and permitted tourists to not only walk around the rock but to all scale the side of the rock to reach the top. This caused severe distress among the original owners of the land, the Aboriginal tribe, for it was a violation of the sacredness associated with the rock itself. The Aborigines incorporated Uluru, Fulu, and the salt lakes into their creation stories, moral teachings, and had sacred sites which restricted members of the female sex from seeing them, so that there were stories passed down from generation to generation about the sacred sites, and if these

sites or stories were ever revealed to members of the female sex it would be breaking sacred laws and violating cultural taboos. These religious rules were unknown to tourists, and the Aboriginal culture was disrespected since tourists were taking pictures of the sacred sites and then posting them on the web for all to see. Since there was only one bathroom, visitors would treat the watering holes, both on top of the rock and beside it, as their own personal bathroom and trash receptacles thus leaving the environment polluted and the Aboriginal tribe angered at the violation of their land and culture.



Figures 1 and 2: Our tour guide Dave teaching the group about the Aboriginal cave paintings found on Uluru.

The Aboriginals were finally able to repossess the sacred sites on condition that they lease the land from the Australian government . Since the completion and enforcement of this arrangement the Aboriginal people have been working with tour companies in order to education tourists about the Aboriginal culture. Tour companies, such as the Rock Tour Company, have hired Aboriginal people to act as guides and to train other guides on the indigenous culture in the hopes that tourists will one day respect the Aboriginal culture.

The Kata Tjuta/Uluru experience has made me more aware that not being sensitive to learning about cultures has led to devastating wars and mass murders across the world. Culture separates us as human beings because we place too much emphasis on the fact that our differences are a problem. However, at the same time, as our desire to travel abroad demonstrates, we all appreciate the beauty of diversity in the world and so it is essential that we need to learn how to respect other cultures in order to keep the peace.

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Learning About Education While Abroad By Lauren Farruggia (U.K.)

As the prospect of my study abroad experience approached, I was giddy and elated. I had the highest expectations for my excursion to Lancaster, England, and could hardly wait until the end of the summer when I would ship off across the pond. I was prepared for homesickness, but thought little of the culture shock discussed in the study abroad sessions – after all, the cautious side of me had selected England as my destination of choice because we shared a common language and cultural customs. I never expected, however, that my inherent Americanness would be such a point of difference, or that it would seriously effect how others perceived me before I even opened my mouth. I was naïve to overlook these potential challenges.



I arrived at Manchester International airport on August 18th, exhausted, but thrilled. I found the train station after purchasing an Orange sim card for my cell phone (funny how communication with friends and family back home was my first priority upon arrival) and purchased a one-way ticket to Lancaster. I was not alone, but accompanied by a fellow Gator from home, whom I did not know very well at the time. We took turns marveling at the quaint, rain-soaked countryside ,while the other caught a few moments of precious sleep – we were petrified of missing our stop. That is, however, exactly what happened: only we did not sleep through it. We took so long trying to get our massive bags down from atop the trolley provided that we could not get out in time. Fortunately, a few kind Scots noticed our plight and told us to get off at Oxenholme,

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the next stop on the train, and explain to the conductor that we were trying to go to Lancaster. We followed their advice and eventually made it to our destination, cold and bewildered.

I felt incredibly embarrassed after the near disaster on the train. I remember thinking to myself: “of course, the two American girls *would* miss their stop because their bags were too heavy to lift.” The incident became a metaphor during my first months at the university. My heavy bag represented all the cultural baggage I had brought with me from America, and all that I could not bear to abandon. It prevented me from breaking out of my comfort zone. I clung to my preconceived notions about the United Kingdom for that first month – I voluntarily maintained a distance between myself and my host culture. I was not the only person to do this. The other Americans enrolled in the International Summer Programme had adopted the same tactic. We clung to one another and forged fast, sloppy friendships looking for the comfort of home. We complained about the food, the weather – anything to get our minds off of how much we missed the U.S. This was, interestingly, the first of the lessons that my study abroad experience forced me to confront -- the challenges of a diverse, interconnected world. I had to acknowledge how difficult a task overcoming cultural differences would prove to be.

In her essay, “American Students Abroad Can’t Be ‘Global Citizens,’” Talya Zemach-Bersin states in response to her own study abroad experience:

American students who travel abroad cannot be expected to transcend historical, political, social, and global systems of power in order to become cross-culturally immersed "global citizens." We can, however, be asked to become internationally conscious and self-aware American citizens who are responsible for thinking about those critical issues. (3)

Talya’s words aptly summarize how I felt about my situation as an American student traveling abroad. There seemed to be an enormous amount of pressure from my parents, my friends, and the Allegheny community to “get something” out of my experience that would “transcend” my expectations. I learned that this was difficult to do once British (and other) students joined the few Americans of the International Summer Programme on Lancaster University’s campus in October. At first, I was incredibly amused by the impressive array of accents and personalities that I encountered on my daily walks throughout campus. I failed to comprehend, however, that the funny accents were not just representative of the quirky British culture I had seen represented in Hollywood movies – these accents were *real*, steeped in political, regional, and class-based



history that I could not possibly begin to put straight. I became self-conscious of my own accent, for it was the first thing that set me apart from my English-speaking companions.

I never thought much about the American accent, or what it must be like to hear it with a British ear. My accent was received with amusement on occasion: my flatmates first thought of me as simply a comically less ‘civilized’ version of themselves. But on other occasions, my accent was used to imply that America is a nation of inherently racist, uneducated, Walmart-shopping country folk with little knowledge of the global community. I loathed these exchanges when I found myself apologizing for America’s damaged international reputation more than I could defend it. Though I believed myself to be an “internationally conscious, self-aware American citizen,” suddenly words failed me when I was confronted by a list of American atrocities in the world.

Eventually, once I gained confidence, I realized that those who felt that my accent represented ignorance were ignorant themselves. I acknowledged that their arguments were simply one point-of-view and accepted that by choosing to study at an international university, I had to overcome the stereotypes that were being thrust upon me. I began to explore more of my surroundings, I tried new foods, and I spoke to new people. My flatmates and I became good friends and soon they began introducing me to British culture as they knew it. I wanted to share American culture with them, too, and hesitantly brought up the idea of a Thanksgiving dinner in the beginning of November. They loved the idea, and together we created a massive British/American feast for twenty-five people. It was a wonderful occasion that, to me, epitomized what was supposed to come from my study abroad experience. That night we all sat around the table as human beings and shared bits of our lives and, without really knowing it, we hurdled the mental barrier that prevented us from understanding one another before that moment. Even now, I look back upon this occasion fondly.



My British flatmates and I became close after our Thanksgiving dinner. We were aware of the dwindling time we had left together and tried to enjoy each other’s company as much as possible. We spent much of our time discussing various differences between American and British society, including accent, popular culture, and politics. I knew very little of British politics



before coming to England, which was embarrassing to admit; especially considering how much my flatmates knew about the American political system. They educated me about various controversial policies that were sweeping the nation at the time – for instance, the raise in tuition prices. The increase seemed tiny to me (Allegheny’s tuition is not exactly low) which I attempted to explain as politely as I could. They were outraged by the prospect of having to pay more, because secondary education had always been regarded as a citizenship right in Britain, and had been historically low in cost. An increase in tuition, they argued, would severely downsize the population of eligible university students. This seemed absurd to me – since although tuition is high at Allegheny, I certainly do not have to pay all of it. Most of my British flatmates were paying their own way through school, I could rely on my parents and scholarship money. I later realized that unlike America, not having access to higher education would keep lower classes imprisoned in a very rigid class structure. Like the situation with the suitcase, I became embarrassed by the privilege that defined being an American student. I had taken my study abroad experience as well as my tuition scholarships and financial aid for granted as something common to all students in the industrialized world. This was clearly not the case.



As my date to fly home approached, I began reflecting on my study abroad situation. I did not leave England, I think, with the same innocence with which I had arrived in August. I was almost apprehensive about my return back to the land of Big Macs and Starbucks, despite how eager I was to reunite with friends and family. I will not say that I became used to a simpler life in Lancaster – the town and university was just as well-equipped as any American one – but I had become more comfortable with the (for me, revolutionary) notion that America was not the center of everything. I was not, of course, so naïve in the past to think that America was the only country that mattered, but I left Lancaster with a greater appreciation for the world at large. I just did not know how to articulate that when I arrived back home.

I was met with the usual whirlwind of questions upon reuniting with my friends and family. And, as I have heard from others returning from their own journeys, I did not know how to answer the questions I kept receiving. Yes, I had a wonderful time abroad. Yes, I learned many new things, met many new people, and seen a lot of amazing places. But my experience was so much more than just a four-month long academic stay in Lancaster, England. I had forged a life



abroad. I had developed an identity different from the one I display at home. I had opened my mind to America's 'home' culture, and left a little bit of myself in the hearts of my friends, as they stay in mine. How did my study abroad experience prepare me for challenges in a diverse, interconnected world? It introduced me to the challenges of thinking in complex ways about how my experiences compared with those in other cultures, and therefore compelled me to consider the ways in which money and access to opportunities can sometimes be made invisible. I will never be able to look at the privilege I have as a given for everyone else. My study abroad opportunity opened the doors for appreciating new experiences even if they were painful at times, and they also made me appreciate what I have at home.

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Discovering New Worlds by Maranda Nemeth (Costa Rica)

Traveling to the School for Field Studies (SFS) in Atenas, Costa Rica last semester presented with new experiences and allowed me to learn about issues from a whole new perspective. Throughout the semester, new challenges arose and I was forced to confront them. Since I have been home for the past 3 months, I have realized how my time in Costa Rica has reshaped me for the better. I feel as though this experience has further prepared me for the diverse and interconnected world that exists within and outside of the Allegheny College campus. These were unique experiences that could never be replicated on this campus and thus, I would have never gained these skills without study abroad. One example took place during our directed research, which happened over the last three weeks of the semester. My group and I encountered various challenges in collecting our data. Despite the hardships, we pulled through, which showed me that I can adapt to any situation that arises.

For the directed research we were divided into various groups to work alongside the professors and we, the students, voted and chose the project we were most interested in to work on for the three weeks. For my research, I choose the assessment of macroinvertebrate communities and palm mortality rates. I was very excited for we were traveling to two different locations in the



I beg young people to travel. If you don't have a passport, get one. Take a summer, get a backpack and go to Delhi, go to Saigon, go to Bangkok, go to Kenya. Have your mind blown, eat interesting food, dig some interesting people, have an adventure, be careful. Come back and you're going to see your country differently, you're going to see your president differently, no matter who it is. Music, Culture, Food, Water. Your showers will become shorter. You're going to get a sense of what globalization looks like. It's not what Tom Friedman writes about, I'm sorry. You're going to see that global climate change is very real. And that for some people, their day consists of walking 12 miles for four buckets of water. And so there are lessons that you can't get out of a book that are waiting for you at the other end of that flight. A lot of people - Americans and Europeans - come back and go, "ohhhhh!" And the lightbulb goes on.
Henry Rollins

Caribbean lowlands. The project demanded a lot of on-site data collection over a very short duration of time. This combined with other factors created a somewhat difficult research agenda for the research group and myself. One challenge was while completing the tract lines from the edge of the forest inwards. We were recording various attributes of the palm trees and one was the height. Granted, it was the end of November which is the beginning of the rainy season on the Caribbean Coast and thus, we suffered torrential downpours that particular day. We were on the second to last tract line when the real rain began. Bushwacking through a tropical rainforest is already hard enough, but now we were all soaked from head to

toe and the rain was making it difficult to see. Furthermore, the rain was very loud and we had to communicate the data to each other, yelling out the numbers until our voices were hoarse. Then, for the taller palms, we had to count the leaves and measure the height with a specific tool, which required you to look skyward. This was the real challenge since the rain drops were so big and filled our open eyes so that it was painful collecting these data points. To top it off, this was research I had never conducted prior to this experience so I had not been completely prepared. In the end though, we acquired all the information we needed for our research project and from my perspective, it was because we had all worked together and adapted to the situation.

From this specific experience in the field, I quickly realized that I can be flexible in difficult situations. In a world that is constantly evolving and changing, I think that this skill is completely vital to have. As a team, we communicated through the rain and recorded our data points. In actuality, we ended up having more fun with the field research because of the rain. Having a good time and laughing about the situation motivated us to push through the challenge and complete our goal. I feel that the communication and team skills I learned and exercised could easily



apply across other situations, whether it is a summer internship back in the U.S. or meeting a new person in a professional setting.. This was just one example where I practiced the skills that made me step back from the individualism that I have become used to practicing at home and to trust in collaboration. All it takes is assessing what is occurring then adapting oneself in order to move forward, so that one is learning all the time.



Another experience I had while abroad in Costa Rica was volunteering with my group from SFS at a local school in Costa Rica. The school was for younger kids who were at the elementary school age, and prior to the school visit, we designed a lesson plan for the hour or so we would have with them. While at the school, we also worked on revitalizing some classrooms with some fresh paint. The school was located in a poor, rural community, which in Costa Rica is not that uncommon. The country itself is considered a ‘developing’ country and typically when I heard that word, I automatically pictured a struggling and illiterate community that desperately needs help. Thus, I had this image in mind prior to the volunteer project day. We arrived at the school and began our lesson plan which comprised of a small lesson on recycling and conservation of waste, and the rest were small little fun activities. The schoolchildren had little to no English skills, so that we had to exercise our Spanish skills. As we began with the icebreaker activities just to get the kids warmed up to us and become comfortable, I started to think that despite the huge cultural gap that existed between us, we were still able to forge a connection. Here was this group of American students who were also learning from the school children at this school, which must have been an interesting observation for those children, I’m guessing. All of us had taken the time to learn Spanish through classes and to practice back at campus, so we were able to communicate rather well with the children. As we moved on through the day, we got to the environmental lesson. This was the lesson I had helped design and once we began to cover the topics of waste and the importance of reusing and recycling, I was taken aback at how much

these children already knew about the topic. They were fully aware of the implications of human waste on the environment. This was a complete contradiction of what I had originally assumed. Seeing how knowledgeable they were about local sustainability issues, I realized by the end of the day that we had actually learned more from them, than the other way around.

This volunteer experience in Costa Rica helped open my eyes to the realization that we often go in with all kinds of preconceptions when interacting with different cultures. It can be hard to erase the previously developed opinion regarding a specific culture but once you immerse yourself in it, you have to be open to revising what you thought you had known. I think it is also important because of the world we are living in now, where there is the mixing of so many beliefs and cultures, that it is important to take some time to get to really get to know the positive value of our differences. I also think it is important to always keep in mind the fact that while there may these vast differences between regions and people, there are also many similarities. The school children reminded me of that. In the end, everyone wants to connect and learn about each other. All it takes is to reach out and find what you have in common with the community and make connections with that base to form a relationship. As Carolyn Smith realizes about her own travel, "...for an experience so ideologically grand, it was really quite simple" (Smith 76).

For me, the point was just that simple -- sometimes the key to understanding and appreciating cultural differences or figuring out how to connect or where our similarities lie, can be as simple as listening -- which is what we had done with the school children.





This study abroad program has provided me with so many experiences that will prepare for the challenges that are ahead. During my time there, I gained multiple skills such as intercultural interaction, communication, adaptation, and motivation just to name a few. I expanded my Spanish speaking skills as well, and with this language growing so rapidly in the US and the world, I am excited to have this skill for the future. I realized the importance of connecting what you are doing to the community around you. When you living in a new area, for even a short period of time, I think that it is important to participate in the host culture. This was my first time traveling for such an extended period of time and I think it has inspired to me to explore more areas and cultures in the world. People learn best first hand and through real life experiences, which are unique and unpredictable. Only then can someone develop the skills to respond to the incredible diversity across borders, and connect with others in meaningful ways.

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Unlearning Culture By Nate Summers (Lancaster, U.K.)

Before one is forced to leave one's native country, it is easy to make generalizations about the world. Just as it seems easy and obvious who is right when only one side of a story is told. It can be tempting to simply overlook the other side without ever giving serious merit to any other perspective than what we have heard and accepted as 'common sense'. Such was my background when I got on a train heading from Paris to Amsterdam. I had only left the U.S. twice prior to this -- once to travel to Guatemala with my family on a mission trip, and once to see Niagara Falls in Canada. I had rarely left 'my side' of the story. As far as I was concerned, the United States had always been on the right side of history. Democracy (as defined by us) was clearly the best form of government, and it simply did not make sense why any other country would even attempt any other system of government. After all, hadn't America already solved that problem for the world?

However after studying abroad, and especially after two particular instances during this time in Lancaster, England, I learned that my view of the world was not only one of many, but not necessarily the best. I had to learn that, as Paul Pedersen has observed, "two persons can disagree without being right and the other wrong—when their arguments are based on culturally different



assumptions” (120). Only after my time abroad was I able to acknowledge my assumptions, and learn to interact with the world being conscious of my biases. For after one becomes aware of personal biases based on one’s place in the world, these cease to be a hindrance and become devices with which to destabilize one’s world.

As I said earlier, before going to Lancaster I had had very little experience truly interacting with people from different cultures. Of course as an educated person, I knew that there were people who did not speak American English, or who did not view America as the beacon of hope and freedom in the world, as I did. However, since I had only had exchanges with Americans during my sheltered travels, I had yet to get an opportunity to see what the rest of the world really thought about my country and my countrymen. Thus while I was abroad, I took every opportunity to test how ‘outsiders’ would view me. I finally got this opportunity while on a fifteen hour train ride between Paris and Amsterdam. There I was sitting in my sleeper car when a young Iranian couple entered the compartment. They had just finished visiting friends in Paris and were headed to Amsterdam. I had studied the conflict between our two nations in classes back at Allegheny College, and more importantly had a certain understanding of the situation based on American media reports, so I wondered how our conversations over the next fifteen hours would go. I was pleasantly surprised when the husband, realizing I was American, introduced himself, and casually added “I don’t think our Presidents like each other.”

This comment threw me off for two reasons. First, of all the openings I was expecting from an Iranian, humor was not one of them. I had expected either to be screamed at for attacking their way of life, as I had seen other Iranians do on television, or extolled for aiding his country in efforts to establish a working democracy. Second, I had never actually thought of the President of Iran as an actual political figure. As far as I was concerned, there was only one President in the world, and he resided in the White House. My Iranian friend must have sensed my hesitation, and we quickly got into a conversation about what life is like in Iran.

The first thing he wanted me to know was that despite what our news stations say (he was quick to point out that all of our news stations were guilty of this, not just the conservative Fox News) Iran was a place where it is in fact possible to live a free life. He explained that in Iran people have television, read books, and have fun just like he expected people in America do. It was a strange concept, thinking of Iran, the country whose very name can at times instill fear, being described in terms that made it seem just like my homeland. We entered into a



THE FACT IS, WITH EVERY FRIENDSHIP YOU MAKE, AND EVERY BOND OF TRUST YOU ESTABLISH, YOU ARE SHAPING THE IMAGE OF AMERICA PROJECTED TO THE REST OF THE WORLD. THAT IS SO IMPORTANT. SO WHEN YOU STUDY ABROAD, YOU'RE ACTUALLY HELPING TO MAKE AMERICA STRONGER.

MICHELLE OBAMA

conversation covering where we lived, what we liked to do, and what we thought of each other's country and I realized that this man was actually a good deal like me. He too came from a rural background, enjoyed hiking and taking nature walks, and loved to fish. We swapped fish stories the rest of the afternoon, and I realized that maybe my fear-provoking image of Iran had been so easy to construct because I had never really thought of Iranians in human terms.

This was the first big step in my journey to becoming a global citizen. I was starting to learn that just because a person lives in a different place, and has different customs, does not make them better or worse than you. In fact I had more in common with this man from half way across the world than I did with many of my peers at Allegheny College. I was able to see that my stance on Iran had come from a cultural bias. I was making decisions

about how I felt about an entire country without having met a single person from that country. And, in meeting this couple, I was able to step outside of my cultural prejudices and see my new Iranian friends as people I could relate to.

The second awakening I experienced actually never should have taken place. In the final few days of my time in England, I had traveled down to London and was patiently awaiting my plane ride home. Having been gone for so long, I was ready to get back to my family and friends (and an accent I didn't have to strain to understand) but felt as if I still had yet to learn my final lesson from study abroad. Heathrow Airport must have felt the same way, as it shut down for three consecutive days before I gave up and decided to travel south to Southampton in an attempt to get off the island. When I arrived at the Southampton Airport it was around seven in the afternoon, and my flight was scheduled for six the following morning. I had planned on simply staying the night in the airport terminal, thinking that since I had already done that for two nights, a third night couldn't hurt. Unfortunately, what I soon realized was that the airport shuts down at nine at night and does not allow passengers to stay on the premises overnight. Suddenly, I found myself homeless in a city that did not seem to have any vacant hotel room. After walking



through downtown, I stumbled upon a building with the word “Hostel” written across the top. Excited at the chance to lie down and rest, I entered the ‘Hostel’, but soon learned that it was not exactly what I had in mind. This Hostel was actually more of a halfway home for disturbed youth. The gentleman at the desk informed me that the establishment was akin to what YMCA does in the States, letting young adults who have nowhere else to go stay for a few nights to get back on their feet. I informed him of my situation and he graciously offered me a cup of tea and a couch for me to spend the night.

I later learned that the man’s name was Abdule, and that he had come from Ghana to Southampton to attend the university there. He was one of the most intelligent people I’ve ever met, and he explained to me in detail his plan to bring what he had learned in Southampton’s managerial school back to Ghana to help his country develop economically. I was moved by what Abdule had to say. Up until this point, the idea that a non-American would help me in a foreign country had never even crossed my mind. Abdule was so determined, and seemed so set on achieving his goal, that I was deeply moved by what he said. We discussed the problems of Ghana, and other African countries, and he explained that he was convinced that the only thing that needed to happen to bring his country out of its current state was for people to start caring. I am by no means an idealist, so I was not initially convinced by this. Surely funding, international aid, or some sort of monetary assistance was needed first. However Abdule stuck to his belief, and insisted that while money is important to fixing problems, unless people genuinely cared about their country and their countrymen, nothing would change.



I left Southampton the next morning with a new purpose, and have since been in contact with Abdule about ways I can participate in his cause. He has since held multiple phone interviews with the outreach coordinator of my church in Atlanta, and we talk regularly on Facebook and via email about his plans, as well as my plans to leave my legacy at Allegheny College through my service in the Allegheny Student Government. Abdule taught me that no matter where a person is from, the emphasis should be that people come first. Abdule had a view of the world that was trans-national; he did not see me as an American, or himself as a Ghanaian, but



instead he saw us both as just people, people who want to make a difference in the world. This is the greatest lesson I will take from my time abroad: that I must transcend my cultural biases, and while it may be impossible to ever fully put them by the wayside, I will try and view every new challenge in this adverse, interconnected world as a starting point for unthinking what I believe I ‘know’ and opening my mind to new learning. We are citizens of a global society, and we have to see one another as members of the same community in order to overcome our stereotypes and work together in building a better world..

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Speaking French With A Foreign Accent By Nikki Similak (France)

My study abroad experience in Angers, France was so much more than just traveling and having fun. I learned about many aspects of different cultures as well as aspects of myself that I never knew existed. It would be quite challenging to discuss all of the changes I underwent while living in France, so I will just be discussing a few main points. I gained many different skills while abroad that I know will help me navigate our complex and interconnected world. I have found that I can be very adaptable, open, and comfortable in new and challenging situations now that I have had time to reflect on my experiences. I feel that these are three very important traits that can help anyone deal with difference without shutting down their hearts and minds to what at first seems strange, uncomfortable, or even stressful.

The first trait that I had to acquire while living in France was the ability to adapt to new situations. Upon arriving in Angers, the anticipation at meeting my host mom was almost unbearable. I had no idea how I should act around her. For instance, should I hug her? Kiss her? Shake her hand? Needless to say, I had no idea what to expect and there have only been a few instances in my life when I have been that nervous. When she finally did come to pick me up at the train station, she went ahead and gave me those legendary kisses on the cheek for which the French are so famous. It was very odd for me at first to be getting so many kisses every time I left or came home, but after a few weeks it became completely normal. Even now I am realizing



the extent to which I truly enjoyed that part of the French culture. Another part of life in France that was amazingly different from the United States was the mealtime ritual. Most stores around Angers were closed from noon until two in the afternoon because every person would leave so they could enjoy meals with their families or friends. I find myself thinking now and then that the stores will be closed at noon-time, but then I realize that I am not in France anymore. As Americans, we are always on the go and eating in a rush, but in France, it was the complete oppo-



site. Dinners with my host family lasted about two hours on average every night. It was a time to come together, unwind, and talk about the day with loved ones. At the first dinner with my host family, I was completely taken aback by the time I was expected to spend at the dinner table. I kept thinking about all of the other things I could be doing with my friends. It was something completely new that I hardly ever experienced with my family in the United States, except during the holidays. I adapted quite well to this aspect of life in France so that in fact it is now very difficult for me to eat quick meals and continue doing everything ten times faster than when I lived in Angers. Reverse -adaptability or getting used to being back home has ironically been a greater culture shock than the newness I encountered when I was abroad. I believe this is also because what I miss most are the opportunities for real human connection and intimacy, and slowing down to relish life -- something we rarely do in the States because time is measured differently back here.

The next skill that I developed was my ability to be open to new people and situations. While studying in Angers, France, I was enrolled in the international program which consisted of about four hundred students within our French university. Thanks to this program, I had to opportunity to meet people from literally all over the world. This was one of the most rewarding parts of my entire experience abroad. Not only did I have the chance to meet French students, but also Taiwanese, Chinese, Canadian, Japanese, Russian, Mexican, and too many other nationalities to be listed here. Before studying abroad, I had always thought it would be interesting to meet people from other cultures, but only now do I understand just how fortunate I was to be able to meet and befriend so many different types of people while abroad. During our Language



class, we did a section on important holidays in France. One of these holidays was Christmas and we all discussed what this holiday was about. Growing up as a Christian, I was familiar with the holiday and I guess I took it for granted that most people would know about it as well. I was quite taken aback when my Chinese friend Feng turned to me and had absolutely no idea what it was or why we celebrated it.



Before going to France, I had never even thought about the possibility of people not knowing the same types of things that I had known all of my life. It made me realize that everyone is not like me and that it is important to embrace those differences no matter what they may be. I also became very good friends with a girl named Yang who is from China. She was in a few classes with me and we ended up spending a lot of time going to the market, the movies, and just being together. It was absolutely amazing to talk to her and hear about her family, life, and goals for the future. We always found ourselves having a great time and exchanging jokes *in French* and realizing with amazement that we needed this foreign language to communicate with each other. Suddenly English was the foreign language to me, and French became the common ground for all of us to talk with one another. That truly shook my assumption of what a global language is.

The third aspect of studying abroad was that it has helped me feel confident facing new and challenging situations. Before coming home to the United States for Christmas, I decided to visit my close German friend who had been a foreign exchange student in my high school a few years ago. On the train to Germany, I met a French girl around the same age as myself who was traveling alone. I invited her to come along with my German friend and me so she could see the city with us. This does not seem very interesting except for the fact that my French friend only spoke French and German, I only spoke English and French, and my German friend only spoke German and English. Needless to say, the three of us did not have any common language that we could use to hold a shared conversation. It was quite an interesting challenge to use three different languages to have a conversation between us, but it is an experience that I will never forget. Even though I was nervous at first about the three of us spending time together, we had an absolutely amazing time. If I had not learned to be more comfortable in new and challenging experiences, I would not still be friends with these people or have had such a great story to tell.



Another way in which I have become more comfortable with new experiences was through our international night at our university in Angers. All of the different cultures were represented in some way and I was able to learn about music, dance, and traditional costumes from many diverse places. For instance, we had to an opportunity to learn about South Korea and its geography as well as its government and traditional costumes. The ability to be comfortable in new situations is a very important skill for coping with a diverse and connected world because it is necessary to be able to feel at ease in any situation.

I understand what Barbara Kappler meant when she writes:

When I left Malaysia I was a bit wiser. I walked to my favorite places and sat and absorbed the sights, smells, and sounds of that amazing country. I spent an evening with my Malaysian friends having a relaxing dinner and talking about the past few months. I felt I was just getting to understand this tropical place of contradictions. Even though I was not ready, I left in peace, having said my goodbyes, promising myself and others to return (72).

I feel that this quote captures my feelings as I approached the day when I had to return to the States. Like Kappler, I felt I was just getting to a place where I was starting to understand the complex details of the culture that tourists would never get. I was ready to bring my exciting insights home to share with others, and confident that one day I would return to continue my journey in this country I had come to love so much. Studying abroad has been vital in shaping who I am today. I would never have been able to appreciate what we mean by cultural diversity if I had not had the opportunity to go to a different country and learn to be at home there.

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Through Different Eyes By Wenonah Echelard (Spain)

“Señoras y señores, Bienvenidos a Madrid Barajas. Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Madrid, Barajas.” And, so it began. My multi-lingual, multifaceted study abroad experience that provided me with all that I could have ever expected from a year overseas, and more. The spring semester of 2010, I spent in Sevilla, Spain at a private Spanish-language learning program where I adopted the exotic lifestyle in Southern Andalucía. For the following fall semester, I ventured northward to Angers, France where I spent half of the summer and the entire fall semester in l’Université Catholique de l’Ouest in an intensive French language-learning institution. Thanks to my various intercultural experiences, I returned from my year in Europe not only tri-lingual and culturally enriched, but also with a new understanding of the world and my place in it as a global citizen.



My immersion in the various subcultures and lifestyles within both Spain and France was given added depth by my experience of living with host families. Not only did each of these families provide me with meals and lodging, but they were important sources of insight into the culture of each country. I was truly fortunate to have two welcoming and kind families who were eager to help me learn about and appreciate the little-known details of everyday life and to share their lives with me, so that I would have a better understanding of the culture on a day-to-day basis, and not imply from a tourist’s limited view. Over the course of many conversations and following their patient responses to my endless questions, I was soon able to discover and interpret the gestures and rituals that suddenly made me feel familiar and at home in my new surroundings.

Before my study abroad, I discovered this tip in the *World Citizen’s Guide* under “#8. Save the lectures for your kids” :

Whatever your subject of discussion, let it be a discussion, not a lecture, and try to leave right and wrong out of it. Justified or not, the U.S. is seen as imposing its will on the world. Try to show willingness to understand other viewpoints.

By adopting and practicing this approach, I was able to see and discover each country and its diverse cultural values from a broader, more tolerant perspective which is the way in which I know



this experience has prepared me to face and overcome the challenges we face as global citizens in a diverse, interconnected world.



Conversations with Spaniards and French, particularly my host families, allowed me to learn about and better understand the country as well as the people with whom I was living. Questions helped me to initiate interesting and complex conversations. The inquiries typically started with simple questions such as: “How did you make this dish?”, “Why doesn’t anyone smile at me on the street?” or “Why didn’t you participate in the strikes?” However, as my language skills improved, and I became more culturally ‘greedy’, I began to provoke more in-depth discussions that stemmed from larger questions like “Why do the French have laws protecting their language and culture?”, “What is Spain doing to adjust to the influx of African immigrants?” or “How did the tendencies and actions of Colonial France predict its current diplomatic position?” It was from these conversations that I was able to get at the more ideological foundations of the cultures.

One experience in particular precipitated reflections on the foreign culture and introspections on that of my own. One night at dinner, my Spanish host mother, Ana voiced her concern about a story she had seen on the news about an American woman who would be put to death for the premeditation and murder of her husband. Ana asked me something to the effect of, “How can you people, a country that the whole world is presumed to follow and imitate, continue this practice? America is essentially putting itself on the same level as this murderer. Killing someone to punish a crime is a primitive practice that hasn’t been accepted by us since the Guillotine in France...” It was not the actions of the woman that appalled Ana, but the response of our government. Too shocked by her confrontational and brusque approach, I could only listen to her critique of American practices and her support for her own cultural values.



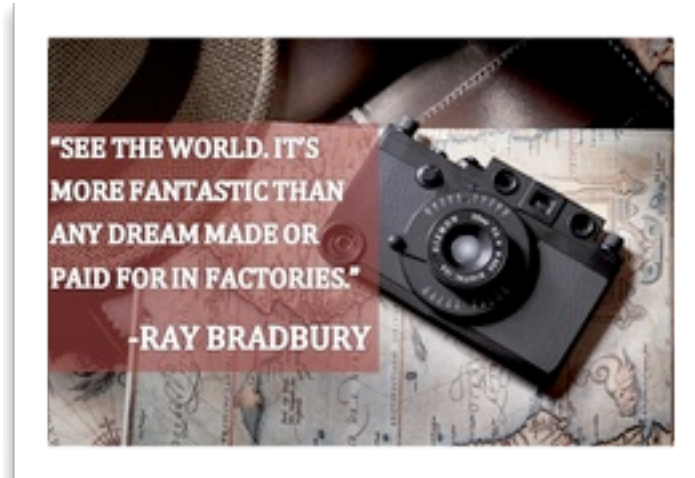
After a long rant, she demanded of me, “How can *you Americans* accept murder as a legal sanction?” I was speechless. I had two options: retaliate or surrender. Despite my desire to broaden her perspective, I knew her cultural predisposition inhibited my ability to enlighten her. Therefore, I took a step back and remembered my first commandment: “Try to show willingness to understand other viewpoints.” I decided to listen to what Ana had to say, and decided to inquire about how the Spanish viewed the Death Penalty and the history of capital punishment in Spain. Throughout our exchange, she offered insight into the Spanish belief system from which I was able to discover what made our countries differ politically, religiously and culturally. As I am from the American mid-West where the death penalty is illegal in almost all surrounding States, I am neither versed nor active in the debate on Capital Punishment. However, Ana, by confronting me on a moral and cultural difference between our countries forced me to overcome my apathy and begin to compare Spain’s stance on the issue with that of the U.S. and to think about whether support for the death penalty was a contradiction of our religious and democratic ideologies back home. It definitely made me unsure about what until then had been my sure stance on moral issues. Suddenly, the moral was political as well, and given our deep discomfort with politics in the U.S., I had never learned to speak about politics as I now did talking with Ana.

This conversation as well as the thousands of others with people of many nations, cultures and backgrounds provoked recurring reevaluations of my own cultural perspective on many issues and I started to see my homeland from a new perspective. After spending time immersed in two unique cultures, I was able to make cross-cultural comparisons and start to appreciate that not everything was black or white. There could be multiple perspectives on an issue and they could all be equally ‘right’ depending on where you stood and how it effected your life. From these new understandings, I began to then re-examine, in the same way how I had interpreted these foreign cultures, through the lens of my own culture. Now removed from my own society, I was able to see what had once been foreign from a more informed point-of-view and through my own experiences. I realized too how bizarre, ignorant and even immoral the cultural practices and norms of my homeland can appear to a foreigner.

This active participating in a foreign culture through interactions and conversations with locals from different cultures, backgrounds and norms excited me because in any single place I could receive numerous and different points-of-view based on the person's class, gender, race/ethnicity, and even age. It has made me see that as national borders have opened up and people



flow across them, whether as workers, immigrants, or tourists, we have the opportunity to benefit from a diversity of ideas and backgrounds if we learn not to fear difference but to view it as an opportunity to learn about one's self through the eyes of others.



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