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Perspectives on Common Challenges at Home Institutions and Study Abroad Programs

Peter Naccarato

I first came to the Umbra Institute in the summer of 2012, with a group of eight students from Marymount Manhattan College. I had worked with the Umbra staff to recruit my students and I was excited to teach my faculty-led course, *Mangiamo: Food in Italian Literature and Film*. When the airplane lifted off from New York's JFK airport, I was ready to leave behind the daily grind of the spring semester and immerse myself in the beauty and pleasure of an Italian summer. I knew that I would have my teaching duties and would need to oversee the students who were accompanying me on this study abroad program, but I also imagined an academic experience free from the usual issues and challenges that we confront regularly at our home institutions.

While I can say that my first summer term at the Umbra Institute (along with three more in 2013, 2014 and 2015) exceeded my expectations, I realized that it took a lot of work to create such a carefree environment for me and for all of the faculty members who teach there each summer. As the teacher of a faculty-led summer course, I was afforded the luxury of distancing myself from many of the challenges faced by study abroad programs like the Umbra Institute. But having worked as an administrator at the Institute during the current academic year, I have come to recognize that study abroad programs deal with many of the same challenges faced by colleges and universities in the U.S., but some of those challenges are exacerbated within the study abroad setting. In this short essay, I discuss some of those common challenges and consider strategies for addressing them.

For all of us who work in higher education, curriculum design and development is an ongoing challenge. Common questions that we con-

front include: What is the right balance between ensuring that students study what the faculty deems essential while recognizing the pressure of the "market" to entice students with a curriculum that they will find appealing? Can we use our curriculum design to push students away from seeing requirements as boxes to be "checked off" and instead encourage them to be adventurous and explore areas of interest that may extend beyond their majors or professional ambitions? Should we focus on growing successful programs or investing time and resources in developing new areas of study? As we address these and similar questions, we do so in a context in which students are increasingly focused on completing degree requirements as quickly as possible and avoiding anything that leads them away from doing so.

While this reality can put pressure on faculty at any college or university when they design and redesign their curriculum, it poses unique challenges for study abroad programs as well. First, there is the hurdle of convincing students that studying abroad will not delay their progress towards graduation. In fact, in addition to concerns about the overall cost of international study, Shaftel et al. (2007) explain the possibility of a secondary cost: "Students and their parents or sponsors must pay twice for an international study opportunity, first for the opportunity itself and later for the student to make up course work that was not accepted by the home institution or that was missed during the period of foreign study" (p. 27). In this case, issues of transferability and course equivalencies weigh heavily on study abroad programs as they make decisions about curriculum design and development.

A second factor impacting how study abroad programs develop their curriculum is the shifting student demographic for international study. In her 2010 article, April Stroud cites national statistics showing that "the three fields of study most represented among study abroad participants include social sciences (21%), business management (19%), and humanities (13%)" (p. 493). However, shifting enrollments across U.S. colleges and universities are inevitably impacting the study abroad market. As Vande Berg (2007) explains, "The academic interests and needs of

students have considerably diversified, with majors in Business, Sciences, Engineering, and other 'nontraditional' fields going abroad in record numbers" (p. 393). Such changes will continue to influence curriculum offered by study abroad programs that want to stay competitive. Given that these majors tend to be more prescriptive and allow for less flexibility than majors in the humanities and social sciences, study abroad programs will likely face even more pressure to ensure that courses designed to attract science or engineering majors are easily transferable to students' home institutions and that they will fulfill specific major requirements.

Ironically, the familiar refrain that studying abroad allows students to step outside of their usual environment, to experience new people in new places, and to broaden their horizons—both personally and academically—is increasingly joined by guarantees that even while doing so, students will not miss a step towards degree completion because the curriculum they will find at their study abroad program is easily transferable to their home institutions and will allow them to continue fulfilling major, minor, or general education requirements. Of course, this promise puts increasing pressure on study abroad programs to think carefully about stepping too far afield from the types of programs and courses that are most common across U.S. colleges and universities. So the challenge for those of us working on curriculum development within the study abroad context is to be creative and innovative within the constraints of students' expectations that courses taken abroad will easily transfer to their home institutions, will fulfill specific requirements, and will not derail their progress towards graduation.

In addition to what courses are offered, we also face challenges with regard to pedagogy and the possible disconnect between the expectations of students and the traditional teaching methods utilized by many professors. Katrien Struyven, et al. (2010), citing Johnson and Seagull (1968), explain that traditionally, "teachers were too often educated by means of lectures" and furthermore that "teachers tend to teach in the form they were taught" (p. 43). Consequently, professors who adopt such a teacher-centered pedagogy understand their role as "help[ing] students

to acquire knowledge by transmission" (p. 44). As a result, they "do not assume that their students need to be active for the teaching/learning process to be successful" (p. 44). For some professors teaching in study abroad programs – particularly those who were educated within a traditional European framework – lecture-based teaching is the standard and the form of teaching and learning with which they are most experienced and most comfortable.

However, it is increasingly likely that this approach contradicts the classroom experiences of many students coming from U.S. colleges and universities. As Vande Berg (2007) notes, "faculty members are revolutionizing the classroom in the United States and setting high student expectations for what sort of activities, in and outside the classroom, best support their own learning" (p. 395). This change is characterized by Struyven, et al. as a shift towards "student-activating teaching," which "stimulates students to construct knowledge by means of real-life, realistic, practical and relevant assignments that literally require their 'active' involvement to incorporate the available information: that is to select, to interpret and to apply knowledge to practical cases and to solve complex vocational problems" (pp. 44-45). At many U.S. colleges and universities, such approaches have become the norm, with students actively engaged in learning through small-scale exercises (i.e., discussion-based classes, class presentations, small-group work and larger group projects, portfolio-based assessment, etc.) and large-scale practices (i.e., experiential learning, role-playing and other game-based pedagogies, community-based and service-learning projects, etc.). The underlying philosophy of such pedagogical methods is that "students are seen as active knowledge constructors and this activity of students is considered to be a necessary part of the learning process" (Struyven, et al., p. 44).

Given this context, it falls upon study abroad program administrators to foster an environment that encourages ongoing faculty development in order to produce a steady transition towards student-centered pedagogies. But there are significant challenges to doing so, including securing buy-in from professors who may remain committed to the teach-

ing strategies they encountered throughout their own education; setting aside time for faculty to participate in pedagogy workshops and then to incorporate what they learn into revamped courses and syllabi; building internal support systems and external partnerships for community-based learning; establishing realistic timelines for implementing new pedagogies and assessing their effectiveness; and securing the financial resources to support faculty and staff as they do this work. While such an undertaking is not easy, it is necessary if study abroad programs are going to deliver an educational experience that complements and reinforces the pedagogies U.S. students are experiencing at their home institutions and thus have come to expect when they study abroad.

I will conclude by discussing another area in which we are witnessing shifting student expectations at both home institutions and study abroad programs, specifically with regard to diversity and inclusivity. While U.S. colleges and universities have experienced demographic and social changes since at least the 1960s that have required them to focus on these issues, the last decade has witnessed a resurgence of social awareness and campus activism. As Chun and Evans (2018) report, "progressive student movements on many college campuses... [are having] significant positive impacts in motivating some top white university administrators to take significant diversity and inclusion actions that improve their campus racial climates and programs" (np). This is reinforced by Suarez, et al. (2018), who similarly note that "the incorporation of an equity perspective throughout a campus is paramount" (p. 64) and that colleges and universities throughout the U.S. are focused on adopting "policies and processes that infuse diversity and inclusion throughout the institution" (p. 67). Of course, this is a positive development that enhances the educational, social, and cultural experiences of all students, faculty, and staff, particularly those of color and from other traditionally underrepresented groups. At the same time, it poses a unique challenge for study abroad programs.

As Soria and Troisi (2014) explain, "Even as study abroad participation has grown and its benefits have been well documented, disparities

in study abroad participation remain a concern for higher education institutions" (p. 265). They cite several studies that uncover factors for why white students are more likely to study abroad than students of color, including fears of encountering racism abroad and a lack of faculty of color leading study abroad programs. While U.S. colleges and universities need to address the specific concerns of students of color as they promote study abroad programs on their campuses, we also bear responsibility for anticipating these concerns and responding to them. Like our counterparts in the U.S., we must develop programs, policies, and practices that support a diverse learning culture.

Of course, how this is accomplished will vary but there are some common steps that we should all embrace. First, consider adopting a policy or statement on diversity, equality, and inclusion. Such a statement can set the tone for the entire community and can serve as the foundation for additional initiatives that enact the values and priorities that it expresses. Second, make diversity training a priority for faculty and staff development. While such training opportunities can take many forms, they can be beneficial for all faculty and staff, especially those who are not from the United States. Workshops, tutorials, and informal discussion sessions can help all faculty and staff reflect on their own experiences and think about how their perspectives may be different from those of U.S. students. Third, as we welcome students to our programs, we should talk with them about our commitment to creating an equitable and inclusive environment within our classrooms and across our campuses. At the same time, we should prepare them for the realities they may face outside of our doors. While each destination country has its own history and current climate, we all share responsibility for preparing students – particularly students of color – for the realities they may face in their new homes.

Over the last several months, I have come to recognize some of the challenges that U.S. schools and study abroad programs have in common. In reflecting upon them here, I hope to have shown how those challenges are also opportunities to continue building our academic programs, to invigorate our classrooms with new and creative pedagogies, and to cre-

ate communities that embrace the diversity of our students. As we do so, we can become better programs, we can strengthen our connections with the colleges and universities with whom we work, and we can make our students' study abroad experiences even more remarkable.

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