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Transforming Study Abroad. A Handbook

Neriko Musha Doerr
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Reviewed by Federico Damonte

Scholarly literature on study abroad is by now so vast that even a list of the handbooks and monographs trying to survey the whole field would be remarkably long.¹ Beyond these general works, a large literature of more specialised studies now covers most aspects of the study abroad enterprise and experience within different academic disciplines (history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.) and from different points of view (the economics of education, the psychology of personal development, intercultural communication and so on).

Yet, despite the proliferation of both general and specialized studies, the impression remains that as an academic discipline study abroad research still lacks a shared theoretical foundation that makes it possible to analyze the experience of all those involved – not just students, but also teachers and administrators – in precise terms that have some general validity. This basic feature of any general discourse about study abroad seems rather out of reach at the moment, and this in turn has serious consequences for the coherence of the whole literature on the topic.² For instance, Lewin (2009b, xviii) notes that many faculties and study abroad departments extensively use the notion of “global citizenship” to explain

1 See Byram & Feng 2006; Lewin 2009a; Twombly, Salisbury, Shannon & Klute 2012; Sanz, & Morales-Front 2018, among many others.

2 A related and even more serious problem is the basic empirical correctness of the literature, as shown in the common confusion about what study abroad *should* be and what it actually is. See for instance the often made point that study abroad should take place with the consent and active engagement of the local communities, a condition that is seldom observed in reality.

the ultimate goal of studying abroad for a short period. The notion is discussed in much literature on the field (see the extensive references in Lewin 2009a) and is by no means an empty marketing slogan: as Schattle's (2009) article in the same book shows, the roots of "global citizenship" lie in the cosmopolitan tradition, going back to the ideal of "world citizenship" of ancient and modern philosophers, from Socrates to Kant. This provides the phrase with a long intellectual history as well as a specific modern implementation (Nussbaum 1996). Yet as Lewin points out, the notion is not universally accepted:

"Global citizenship is a controversial term, with many people insisting that it cannot exist because it is intimately connected to the nation-state, and others contending that the deployment of global citizenship undermines newer states' long and hard-fought road to achieving citizenship for its own citizens. For these critics, global citizenship is an act of colonialism. Still others assert that while people who engage beyond their borders are doing something, to call that something global citizenship is erroneous." (Lewin 2009b, xviii).

Lewin correctly claims that in the face of these disagreements, we must endeavor to define our terms, even if we are afraid of what we might find (Lewin 2009b, *ibidem*)

In this regard, Neriko Musha Doerr's handbook is definitely most timely, as it represents a much needed deconstruction of several major assumptions in the field, accompanied by constructive proposals, at the end of each chapter about how to move beyond those assumptions. A cultural anthropologist who quotes Benedict Anderson among the scholars who "changed her life", Doerr has already published several articles on study abroad based on in-depth interviews with students. She clearly has the ability to see the ideology behind education policies, as well as the power politics behind the ideology. When applied to the field of international education, this approach results in placing the study abroad experience within a complex network of power relations. More generally, it leads to

a fundamental criticism of what the author calls “homogeneity frameworks,” according to which both the host and home culture are seen as monolithic and homogenous. Instead, she claims that study abroad programs are bound to face the diversity of the cultures of both the host community and the students, and that this fact should be emphasized and used in the study abroad context.

Understandably, a review article cannot do justice to all the observations and insights provided by the author. I thus prefer to focus on Doerr’s discussion of the general features of study abroad, leaving aside her detailed discussion of students living with host families (Chapter 5), and volunteer/service work abroad (Chapter 6). I hope readers will agree with me on the rationale for this choice and soon move from my short review to reading Doerr’s book itself.

In Chapter 1, Doerr starts her analysis with a critical discussion of the notion of “global citizenship.” In doing so, she connects with previous research on the topic quoted above, such as Lewin (2009a). Doerr squarely situates this notion within the larger issues of globalization and different types of international mobility. This approach has the immediate and substantial advantage of providing researchers of study abroad with a term of comparison outside of education – something that many other kinds of analysis lack. Doerr reminds us that we live in a world where “the mobility of the rich is encouraged as cosmopolitan, whereas that of the poor is often seen as illicit, if not forbidden as it is for ‘illegal’ immigrants” (37). In this context, study abroad could be argued to occupy an intermediate position, leading to a precise hierarchy of international mobility, in which the value attached to the higher type necessarily implies a devaluation of the type below. This neatly corresponds to the ambiguous status of study abroad in public opinion, where it is at the same time praised as an indispensable element of higher education, which is necessary to acquire otherwise unattainable skills, and disparaged as a gross commercialization of education, in which students spend time abroad without ever opening a book or mixing with locals, or “commercial travel masquerading as academic experience”, in Lewin’s (2009b) summary description. The author

draws several other interesting consequences from this analysis, some of them new in the field of study abroad research (to the best of my knowledge). For instance, Doerr observes that the low value attached to the mobility of economic migrants naturally implies – within the home country – the devaluation of the experience of minority students with an immigrant background, who could be argued to have as much “global competence” as students who have studied abroad. Instead of recognizing such experiences as valuable, research and policies concerning study abroad ignore it and consider it a deficiency *not* to involve minority students (including those with an immigrant background) in study abroad!

Doerr then discusses the ideology behind the notion of globalization, and her short summaries of previous critiques could not sound more relevant to our field. In this view, globalization is but the current incarnation of the nineteenth century idea of social evolutionism, in which the advanced West spreads progress and commodities to the non-West, which in turn is seen as the passive receiver of Western ideas and goods. In this ideological narrative mobility is associated with the West and “progress,” while the Non-West is seen as static and backward, its role being that of elevating itself by accepting Western people, goods, and commodities. Clearly, such an approach complements Ogden’s (2007-8) description of study abroad as a colonial experience, and could be said to provide it with a theoretical foundation. Once again, Doerr draws several interesting consequences from her analysis: for instance, she points out that the notion of “global education” can have very different meanings in the U.S. context, but usually does *not* include experiences in which mobility is associated with non-West or “static” cultures, such as immigrants’ adapting to a new culture in the host country, heritage students learning (and going abroad to learn) their non-European heritage language, or more generally the learning associated with crossing cultural, racial or economic borders within one’s country (34).

In Chapter 2, Doerr discusses the notion of “culture” in the context of study abroad. As a cultural anthropologist, her discussion is thorough and enlightening, so much so that these pages could be used as an excel-

lent introduction to the topic. The author clearly and critically introduces the notions of “culture”, “multiculturalism”, and “cultural difference.” In particular, she follows Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) in postulating five different types of multiculturalism, which are said to have both general validity and be relevant to international education. Among them, I found the notion of “pluralist multiculturalism” very interesting and relevant. This is the kind of multiculturalism that views all cultures as intrinsically valuable and promotes tolerance of different cultures. In general terms, this is a form of cultural relativism, that is, the idea that beliefs and cultural norms must be understood within their own context rather than according to your own standards (59). In practical terms, this means a withholding of judgment based on one’s own viewpoint, which is clearly an important and useful skill to acquire. As Doerr notes, though, the problem with this approach is what exactly “culture” is. In our commercial world, the celebration of “different cultures” often implies objectifying them into a “safe diversity” of cuisine, art, and fashion (59). In this way, cultural difference is something that anybody can try without feeling threatened, or learning about its wider cultural context (not to mention its unequal economic and political conditions).³ This leads to the paradoxical result of making cultural differences very uniform: all cultures are “different” in the same safe, reassuring, predictable, way. Doerr’s then links this type of multiculturalism with study abroad, claiming that it is often promoted as an “adventure,” an “exploration” of a static, commoditized, foreign culture (61). Toward the end of this chapter, the author puts forward several proposals on how to think of “culture” in the study abroad encounter: it is important, she says, to alert students to the fact that “culture” cannot refer to a single, clearly defined unit; that society is too complex to be described by a hypothetical homogenous culture; and, finally, that “culture” is just one possible way of dividing people up (66-67).

Chapter 3 is dedicated to language and the notions of “linguistic

3 To this list I would add another point: without becoming aware of one’s own standards and viewpoints.

competence” and “native speaker.” Doerr discusses these notions as they lead, in her opinion, to a devaluation of the study abroad student’s attempt to learn the host country’s language. She argues that these notions should be substituted with that of “expertise” and the focus on language learning should be on a “lingua franca” (presumably English) rather than the local standard. The chapter is unfortunately marred by the author’s lack of a clear understanding of the linguistic issues discussed, so that her critique of these two notions will fail to convince most linguist readers. In brief, the notion of “linguistic competence” does not refer to an empty theoretical construct, but to a huge and complex set of theories (phonology, syntax, semantics, and others) and their corresponding data, which all together try to describe the language spoken by native speakers. These theories, in turn, point to a much more complex language than second language speakers of the same, and that complexity corresponds to a much wider communicative expressiveness.⁴ The second language students’ own perception of their limited grasp of the language is not an instance of devaluation, but a correct perception of their own linguistic ability: for instance, many study abroad students do not acquire the ability to ask several types of everyday questions (Damonte 2018). Doerr seems also unaware that this type of reduced learners’ language often has strong and historical negative connotations, which is thoroughly surprising in a scholar evidently so alert to the cultural manifestations of unequal power relations. The colonial and imperialist origins of pidgins and various kinds of “lingua franca” have been studied in detail and are still alive in people’s memories. Does Doerr really think that native speakers are going to appreciate being addressed in a simplified and heavily distorted version of their own language, where all the basic rules of politeness are necessarily absent? Or, even worse, in the patronizing “baby talk” English of former settlers and today’s aggressive tourists? This confusion is all the more unfortunate as the chapter offers some useful

4 Contrary to Doerr’s implicit claim, linguists and language teachers do not believe that this complexity and expressiveness is restricted to the “standard language”, which is a different socio-linguistic notion.

observations. Among them, in my opinion, is Doerr's proposal to stress the diversity of the host language, which naturally corresponds to the cultural diversity in the host and home countries discussed in the previous chapter.

The next chapter is probably the most significant of the whole book, as it carefully deconstructs a long established notion in the study abroad field: immersion. Doerr is very careful to point out the merits in the idea, which makes her discussion even more useful. The chapter begins with a precise and clear description of immersion as a learning method: on the one hand, it discourages spending time with fellow students, or spending too much time in contact with friends and family back home; on the other, it encourages making local friends, engaging in the local community, and spending time with a host family. Defined in this way, immersion consists of everyday activities (buying groceries) and intentional activities (volunteering to teach English in a local school). Doerr starts her critique as follows: "By suggesting that doing *anything* in the host society – including talking to *any* stranger [...] – constitutes meaningful experience, the notion of immersion constructs people in the host society as homogenous" (97). She pointedly adds that "such experience [...] merely provides a sense of how one stranger on the street thinks when someone from another society is [interacting] with them"⁵. She calls all the activities that students are encouraged *not* to do (move in groups, going to bars and restaurants aimed at tourists and so on) "outsider space" and logically observes that recognizing the existence of such a space necessarily implies that "immersion" cannot happen anywhere, any time. More generally: "Even though one's own presence as a visitor from elsewhere changes the configuration of the supposedly homogenous destination, one still seeks to see the destination as homogenous" (98). For many study abroad programs' teachers and administrators working in tourist cities like Florence, this general statement is easily observed in the vast industry that pretends to offer "authentic" experiences, from "typical" restaurants to "real" farmhouses (many of which are meant for foreign students). The au-

⁵ Doerr extends her critique to the practice of having local families host study abroad students, which is the topic of chapter 5.

thor then expands her analysis to the whole relationship between home and host society implied by the immersion paradigm. She notes that by advising students to stay away from the Internet, this paradigm implicitly assumes that the home society is globalized and, therefore, advanced and developed, as discussed above. On the other hand, the paradigm posits that the host society is as local, parochial and, therefore backwards, by assuming it is not discoverable through the Internet. This obviously corresponds to a precise hierarchy, namely, the one discussed in the first chapter on globalization.

Many teachers in study abroad programs will also strongly sympathize with Doerr's claim that immersion devalues classroom learning and teaching. The author provides plenty of evidence in this regard from promotional material, where classroom learning is implicitly posited as inferior to "natural" learning through immersion. This is not only unfair to teachers, but also wrong, since, as Doerr notes, students are going to use in "natural" contexts *outside* the classroom the communicative and interpretative patterns they have learned *inside* the classroom. Every teacher knows that learning is neither inevitable nor automatic. So, learning through immersion depends on explicit teaching. Doerr's corrective proposal in this regard will also find the support of many teachers and educators: focus immersion learning on everyday activities. The overall goal would then be to make students connect their own "immersive" experience with some structure of the host society. In practical terms, this means focusing students' attention on the way people in the host society carry out their daily tasks; as we all know, this is an area of local culture that often remains completely unknown to study abroad students.

The seventh and final chapter contains a remarkably lucid and grounded discussion of that most elusive feature of study abroad: self-transformation.⁶ Doerr carefully describes how theories of self transformation

6 Chapter 6 contains a discussion of the way in which study abroad reinforces the idea of border between countries and culture by the very fact of promoting border crossing as a formative experience, which in turn leads to what the author calls "border pedagogy." Doerr's analysis, while insightful, is more relevant for international volunteer work than study abroad, so I will not discuss it in this review.

are based mainly on students' own narratives. In turn, students' narratives (in the form of interviews or essays) are used by administrators to evaluate and improve study abroad programs. She then turns her focus to the transformative narrative structure associated with study abroad, and points out how it is centered on a "catalyst," which then leads the protagonist to find the "truth" about oneself. The crucial point is that this "discovery" is a part of the study abroad narrative even before students have started telling their own stories. Consequently, it is the students' storytelling that conforms to the narrative, and not the other way around. More generally, Doerr notes that students' narratives are not produced *only* by the students' own storytelling, but that other "coaxers" shape them by asking specific questions and guiding the response. Doerr lists at least three coaxers: the educational institutions in the home country, service rating systems of study abroad programs, and commercial study abroad providers (171). The author offers real life examples from the websites and promotional materials of all these institutions to show how they adhere to an essentially pre-established narrative. As a corrective, Doerr proposes to keep paying attention to students' narratives but sensibly suggests to shift the focus from the transformation itself to the expectations surrounding both the narrative and the whole study abroad experience.

My inevitably short review has provided a detailed idea of the type of critiques and proposals that Doerr puts forward in her book. Yet, as I said from the start, the topics and the ideas I mention in this review are just a fraction of the wealth of material that the author brings to the discussion. Even the summary of existing literature on studying abroad that this book provides would make it extremely useful. More importantly, Doerr's intellectual contribution to our understanding of the study abroad experience makes her work invaluable. In sum, Doerr's research broadens and deepens our knowledge of the field while remaining lucid and practical. Some readers (especially those with a more practical, hands-on approach to our work) may be put off by the author's unrelenting theoretical questioning of both methods and results. In the same way, some teachers will probably find little practical value in the long list

of questions for students that Doerr suggests as a way to overcome the limits of international education as it is today. Indeed, some of these lists seem to require students to become fully fledged cultural anthropologists in order to profit significantly from their study abroad experience. These lists, though, belong to a general reform proposal that it is hard to reject. Basically, this is what Doerr is calling for: Let us make our students as aware as possible of the implications of what they are doing. More generally, Doerr never lets her own analysis lose sight of the realities we all work in and have to accept. Likewise, the issues of globalization, international mobility, national stereotypes (among others), that she brings into the discussion are also very real, and have real consequences for our day to day work with study abroad students. It is the great merit of this book to spell out very clearly what these consequences are.

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