

# An Oral History of Study Abroad

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## Abstract

Living abroad (whether studying, working, or both) is a memorable way to learn with others and to challenge nationalisms, by listening to the diversity of human stories and developing an ear to global polyphony. The art of storytelling has been a universal practice from times immemorial, and a creative way to understand and bridge conflicts. This narrative is an attempt to show how students and educators abroad make that lasting conversation happen and draw together a story map (whether experiential, virtual, or both) as inspiring mediators and future ambassadors.

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Over the years and in different locations, my colleagues played with the idea of recording study abroad stories as told by their protagonists, thus producing an oral history of sorts. Whether in diaries or blogs, students have always looked for ways to graft a life-changing experience onto their Bildungsroman. Yet, once at home, after the initial excitement of family and friends about their adventures in faraway places, the only ones left to share their stories with were their journey companions—their *dear fellows*, as Harold Bloom used to call his assistants on campus. At the same time, faculty and staff – busy as they were attending to the wellbeing of students – may have not kept journals of the day-to-day operations, but they did rely on storytelling as a way of dealing with human conflicts, an observational comedy of sorts. So here and there, every member of the study abroad community has a story to tell, and some of these stories would meet the requisites for a case study. A funny example of cultural misunderstanding was a student in Barcelona who bought a plane ticket to join his father in Nice for a weekend and landed in Tunisia instead. Or a student who had an affair with a famous actor at a Budapest hotel and

was surrounded by paparazzi on her return to Rome, as a local paper in Texas broke the news to the world —and to her fiancé.

Storytelling, however, may be used for a more lasting impact on the community. While setting up a school by the Tiber – dealing on a daily basis with real estate agents, architects, lawyers, and mother superiors – or while struggling to explain to a US attorney the intricacies of colonial Portuguese administration, working abroad has given me the chance to interact with people from all walks of life and to build a bridge between locals and foreigners —not by chance, students with intercultural skills are called “ambassadors” by our marketing staff. Yet, in my experience, there is another way to walk that bridge: by participating in collaborative projects, such as the production of documentaries that bring sensitive topics to the students’ attention. On a recording session about the Roma heritage in Italy (the largest ethnic minority in Europe) we came to interview the late Piero Terracina, a Jewish survivor from Auschwitz-Birkenau, who witnessed a massacre that went unnoticed in history and remains to this day a unique testimony of the *Porrajmos* or Devouring, the equivalent of the Shoah for the Gypsies:

The camp next to ours was called *Zigeunerlager*. There was so much life there. To begin with, there were children. They were living in families. So much life, so many noises, children playing. They even kept their musical instruments. At night, when we came back to the camp, we would hear that they were making music, singing. It seemed to us like an oasis of happiness, so we asked ourselves why this was not also possible for us. We knew that our loved ones who had arrived with us were sent to death in the gas chambers.

The night of August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1944 we were in our compound, and there was curfew. We heard the SS arrive shouting, and the barking of dogs. There was an incredible chaos, because they began to use their clubs to get order, like they always did. The children cried, they had been woken up in the middle of the night; people were calling each other, they were searching for relatives or friends. We also heard some gunshots. This chaos lasted quite a long time; at least a couple

of hours, perhaps more. This is just a hypothesis, of course, because I could not see anything; yet, I think there was an attempt of resistance. And then silence. Not a sound could be heard.

The morning after, wake-up call was at 4:30. As soon as we got up and left the compound, the first thought was to go and see the other side of the barbed wire. And there was no one. There was only silence. There were some doors left open, slammed by the wind; it was always windy at Birkenau. It was so different from the noises we heard the evening before, the songs and children playing. The camp now was empty; there was no one anymore. We looked at the chimneys of the crematorium ovens going at full power. There was high smoke, sparks, flames. They say there were around 5,000 gypsies at the camp. That night they were all sent to death.<sup>1</sup>

Listening to this first-hand account triggered the students' curiosity to learn more about the Roma migration that had left India a thousand years ago and eventually reached the New World. Given the lack of written documents, the only way to reconstruct that exodus was for linguists to study their language (Romani), which incorporated words from every language on its path through Persia, Armenia, Greece, the Balkans, and Spain.

Also thanks to an audiovisual production, but in a quite different setting, students in Rio de Janeiro were inspired by four rowers with disabilities who overcame every adversity in life, crossed the Guanabara Bay and paid tribute to the Paralympic movement worldwide.<sup>2</sup> And yet, at the end of the day one wonders: What is exactly the role of educators abroad? Can we facilitate a 360-degree interaction in a local context?

Herodotus's travels would not have been possible without the institution of the *proxenos* — "the guest's friend." The *proxenos*, or, abbreviated, *proxen*, was a type of consul. Voluntarily or for a fee, he took

1. *I Am Roma, What Can I Do?*, 2010 (<http://soundcloud.com/user-713187559/i-am-roma-what-can-i-do>)

2. A Travessia, 2015 (<http://vimeo.com/133107151>)

care of visitors who hailed from his native city. Feeling at home and well connected in his adoptive city, he took under his wing fellow countrymen who were newcomers there, as a fixer, a source of useful information and new contacts.

Other valuable sources for Herodotus were all types of ubiquitous guardians of memory, self-taught historians, itinerant fiddlers. To this day in western Africa one can encounter and hear a griot, who walks around villages and marketplaces recounting the legends, myths, and stories of his people, tribe, or clan. In exchange for a small payment, or for a humble meal and a cup of cool water, the old griot, a man of great wisdom and exuberant imagination, will relate for you the history of your country, what happened there once upon a time, what accidents, events, and marvels occurred. And whether what he says is the truth or not, no one can say, and it's best not to look too closely.<sup>3</sup>

Whether we knew it or not, by engaging in challenging conversations and honoring a diverse memory, we have acted as *proxens* and mediators between different and even conflicting *modi vivendi*. Living if only for a brief period of time among people who share a language which is not ours can be an antidote against nationalisms, right and left of the political spectrum. A most important lesson of study abroad is that everyone should experience living as a minority to be at least once in the shoes of those who are not from there, so that when they get back they may treat minorities with the same rights and duties as are expected of a majority. And they may be even fortunate enough to run into a griot, an accomplished storyteller whose job is to bridge the gap between generations and perform what Elise Boulding called the 200-year present.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Kapuscinski, Ryszard (2007), *Travels with Herodotus*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 265.

4. "That present begins 100 years ago today, on the day of birth of those among us who are centenarians. Its other boundary is the hundredth birthday of the babies born today. We are linked by the people among us whose life began or will end at one of those boundaries, five generations each way in time. This is our space, where we can move by touching the lives of the young and the old around us." Boulding, Elise (1988), *Building a Global Civic Culture: Education for an Interdependent World*, New York, Teachers College Press, 4.

This being said, as important as the act of telling a story is the act of actively listening to it. Educators abroad are meant to set up the conditions for this conversational narrative to happen. Martin Buber argued that in the beginning is the relation, and to the philosopher every encounter (or rather, every conflict) was a learning opportunity.<sup>5</sup> We have learned through never-ending episodes of violence and war that relationships are the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution, and our contribution to a more peaceful and just world are such fundamental skills as mediative capacity<sup>6</sup> or accelerated intimacy<sup>7</sup>. But what is the extent of our impact? How many people can we actually relate to? Based on his comparative research on the neocortex ratio in monkeys and apes, primatologist Robin Dunbar proposed that our capacity to relate to other human beings can be indeed quantified before groupings become hierarchical in structure:

Human societies contain buried within them a natural grouping of around 150 people. These groups do not have a specific function: rather, they are a consequence of the fact that the human brain cannot sustain more than a certain number of relationships of a given strength at any one time. The figure of 150 seems to represent the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us.<sup>8</sup>

This cognitive limitation, which can be found at organizations of all kinds—schools, churches, corporations, or the military— may be used as a framework to understand group dynamics in international education as

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5. Buber, Martin (1996), *I and Thou*, New York, Touchstone, 69 [1922].

6. Lederach, John Paul (2005), *The Moral Imagination*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

7. Wilkerson, Isabel (2007), "Interviewing: Accelerated Intimacy", in: Kramer, Mark and Wendy Call, *Telling True Stories*, New York, Penguin, 30-33.

8. Dunbar, Robin (1996), *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*, London, Faber and Faber, 55-79.

well, once the student population goes beyond the 150 mark and risks to break the quantity/quality ratio of a program. Now, does the 150 ceiling apply to virtual relationships too?

Like an endangered species, study abroad faces the chance to record its colorful pre-Covid past while the iron is hot. In a new era of human relationships, we try to square the circle of virtual education and feel trapped in an oxymoron —is it really possible to have one’s life changed without leaving home? Since Herodotus we know that stories guide us through the whims of history, but we seem to navigate an uncharted territory with the bare help of statistics and science fiction. Were we to join forces and launch a storytelling project across borders, turning a swan song into an opportunity for growth, it would not only



Apartments of Eleonora of Toledo, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

give continuity to the lessons learned by thousands of students from all over the world, but it may also cast light on how international and interpersonal relations used to be, a mapping memory of how people, organizations, and states related to each other since study abroad became an industry. Without this story map, online education may be a giant with feet of clay.

Finally, a personal memory from a not too distant past. During a trip to the Amazon, my 8-year old son joined a group of American students who instantly adopted him as a mascot. The rainforest opened like a fan: they swam with pink dolphins and listened in silence to a choir of howling monkeys from a canoe. But it wasn't until he visited Florence that the experience abroad made complete sense to him. There was a multisensory tour at Palazzo Vecchio on the history of chocolate and how it was brought from Mexico in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Walking through a room that was decorated in the 1540s for Eleanor of Toledo (an early enthusiast of macaws), my son stopped suddenly and pointed at a fresco: "*Arara!*" And so the guide invited him to share the story of how he fed a bright-colored macaw in the Amazon. Only there and then, standing in awe, two experiences 5,000 miles apart had come full circle, and for a moment everyone stood in silence on that invisible bridge between the New and the Old World.

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