

Chapter 6

A Sense of Place: Creating Spaces for Intercultural Learning in Study Abroad

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ABSTRACT

Popular study abroad locations present challenges for faculty seeking to provide opportunities for meaningful engagement with the host community. The authors describe how a medium-sized state college in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. and the Universidad de Alcalá (UAH) partnered to develop a transformative semester-long study abroad program, promoting community engagement, language acquisition, and personal development. They describe how a resident faculty director can create spaces for intercultural learning in both traditional classrooms and off-campus sites through projects that develop an ethos of sustained engagement and deep reflections, thereby empowering students to immerse more deeply in their host community. Insights from Lave and Wenger's social learning community of practice model provide a novel way to frame study abroad praxis. The authors' experiences suggest that a study abroad community of practice, rather than serving to isolate members from the local community, can serve as a safe-space and catalyst for active engagement with it.

INTRODUCTION

Solving the most pressing issues of our time requires new approaches to help develop the thoughtful and interculturally competent citizens our global era requires. Although frequently working toward the shared goal of increasing students' intercultural abilities, the fields of international education and lan-

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language education do not always have the opportunity to inform one another. For instance, overlapping paradigms from both fields emphasize the importance of critical reflection for intercultural learning. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a model of practice for the creation and ongoing collaboration between a World Languages department, the Center for Global Engagement at the college, and an already existing study center in Spain to provide a transformative semester-long study abroad experience to undergraduate students.

In this chapter we describe how we developed a program led by an on-site faculty director to guide students' intercultural learning to augment the already rich offering by the host institution. Over the past seven years, language faculty serving as faculty directors have utilized paradigms from both language education and global education to develop and deliver intercultural coursework, to provide cultural mentoring, and to foster community partnerships in order to strengthen opportunities for engagement with the local community. These interventions have helped cultivate spaces for deep intercultural learning, as students engaged in a variety of community service and research projects. Written and oral reflections were an essential component in facilitating students' deepening intercultural awareness and fostering an ever-evolving community of practice. This community of practice, in turn, promotes students' sense of agency and intercultural learning during their semester abroad.

BACKGROUND

The College of New Jersey

The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) is a mid-sized, primarily undergraduate institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region whose "teacher-scholar model" showcases the college's longstanding commitment to undergraduate teaching and research. Calls from organizations like the AAC&U to develop additional learner-centered experiences have helped to deepen the college's commitment to hands-on learning and research. The AAC&U's "High Impact Practices" emphasize a scaffolded approach that engages students early in their academic career through research projects and internships related to students' academic major (Kuh, 2008). Successive waves of strategic planning brought TCNJ its own set of high-impact "Signature Experiences," including community-engaged learning, study abroad, mentored undergraduate research, and off-campus internships. Campus-wide conversations focusing on these signature experiences provided academic departments with the opportunity for program review and transformation.

In 2012, this spirit of curricular revision opened a dialogue between the Center for Global Engagement (CGE) and the World Languages and Cultures (WLC) department. Although the WLC department offered its own short-term summer program each year in Madrid, WLC faculty felt they had little say in students' choice of semester-long study abroad programs, allowing students to choose a location from a list of pre-approved programs throughout Spain and Latin America. Students' choices, unfortunately, were frequently determined by cost. However, with the higher cost associated with some of the faculty's preferred programs, they felt unable to limit students' choices reasoning that a less-than-ideal program was better than not studying abroad at all, even though in some cases students returned from their semester abroad with a lower level of oral proficiency than at departure. The CGE had already begun working to establish a series of "TCNJ Study Centers" that sought to provide a valuable academic experience abroad for the price, when possible, of in-state tuition, room, and board. The endorsement of this program model by the TCNJ administration meant that the CGE could gain board approval to charge

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