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Encountering the Other: Student Formation during Study Abroad

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Encountering the Other: Student Formation during Study Abroad

Abstract

Semester study abroad experiences for world language majors at Christian institutions of higher education are meant to challenge the cultural assumptions of students. Author McDonald, though, argues that world language teachers can foster faith-informed intercultural empathy and humility for students in study abroad semesters through guided reading, discussion, and journaling. This student formation can and has happened through two courses the author teaches at Northwestern College for Spanish majors: Pre-Study Abroad Cross Cultural Preparation and Enhancing the Study Abroad Experience. McDonald describes the content of the courses and provides selected student responses from each. This article appears in the *Northwestern Review* with the permission of the *Journal of Christianity and World Languages*.

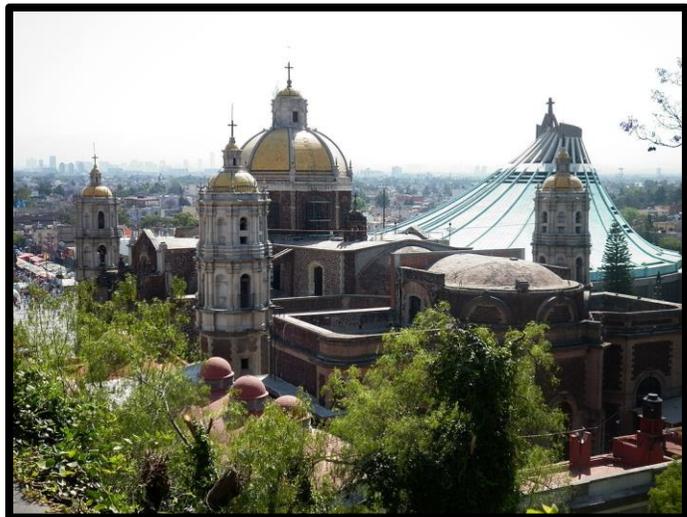
About the Author

Prior to joining Northwestern's faculty, Professor Kristin McDonald taught Spanish at both the high school and college levels. She has studied in both Mexico and Spain, participated in short-term mission trips to Latin America, and taught English as a second language and Bible to Chinese students in Taiwan. She serves as the faculty adviser for the student-led Spanish chapels that are held four times each semester. Outside of Northwestern she uses her language skills to engage in the local Latino community via activities in her church and in the community.

Encountering the Other: Student Formation during Study Abroad¹

by Kristin McDonald, M.A.

The culminating experience for foreign language students is, undoubtedly, their study abroad semester. As students step out of their comfortable home culture and dive into a challenging new culture, they will learn and grow in ways they could have never anticipated or imagined. As modern foreign language faculty, we know the impact that this experience will have on our students’ lives. They will not only make great strides in their language ability, but they will (we hope) grow in maturity, in confidence, in empathy and cultural humility, and in their faith. We cannot simply hope, however, that our students will magically accomplish these intangible goals without some measure of preparation and intentional guidance along the way. Students must actively reflect on their experiences, both before and during their time abroad, in order to move beyond the superficial and to begin translating experience into true learning.



Basilica de la Virgen de Guadalupe, Mexico City.
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To that end, the Modern World Language faculty at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, has committed to addressing these bigger goals through two one-credit courses that have been incorporated into the Spanish major. During the semester prior to our students' study abroad, they are required to enroll in the first course entitled Pre-Study Abroad Cross Cultural Preparation. During our once-a-week classes, we read through David Smith's *Learning from the Stranger: Christian Faith and Cultural Diversity* (2009) and Donald DeGraaf's *There and Back: Living and Learning Abroad* (2015). Both texts help students come to terms with the larger issues surrounding intercultural living and learning, challenging the way they see themselves as cultural beings, and better prepare students for experiences in which their cultural practices and beliefs might differ from that of their new host culture. This level of self-awareness is new territory for many college students, but is vitally important as they begin to understand how every aspect of their daily lives and relationships is impacted by the culture in which they live. Most importantly, the texts and our class discussions challenge students to approach their upcoming semester with a better understanding of how they will be blessed by the cultural others they will encounter and how they will have opportunities to see new facets of who God is in the faces of those who espouse different cultural backgrounds. Smith quotes Andrew Walls to solidify this point: “None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus on our own; only together are we complete in Christ” (145).

In addition to these objectives, students weekly engage in their soon-to-be host culture by watching online news broadcasts to stay current on the social and political climates. Students

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often report that they can better engage with their host families and locals within their new community setting when they can intelligently and inquisitively converse about the candidates in the upcoming elections, the winner of the most recent soccer playoffs, or the social concerns that are relevant in their new culture.

To engage students in the text between classes, our course requires students to journal about the topics related to intercultural learning which are then discussed together during class time. The journal prompts range from topics such as students’ fears and concerns as they approach a semester abroad, what it means to acknowledge their own cultural biases in their new cultural home, how to recognize culture shock, identifying the good and bad that is revealed in human culture, and how to approach their semester with cultural humility.

The primary goal of the pre-study abroad course, then, is to encourage students to think about their faith and how it relates to intercultural learning even before stepping foot in the host culture. Their journal entries have proven insightful and self-revelatory, paving the way for each student to begin to think critically about the experience ahead of them. One student, commenting on her own propensity to withdraw from new, uncomfortable situations, notes: “For me, it’s easier to live alone and depend on myself without having to get involved in the difficult task of learning from others.... But that is not what God wants from us.... I believe that each person I will meet can change me.” She went on to say, “We need to be vulnerable with other people. Their cultural histories and ideas are important, and when we open ourselves up to new ideas, a true relationship can form. Only by this act of giving and receiving can we develop true relationships. Therefore, it’s important to be vulnerable and trusting with the cultural other.” Given an

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opportunity to reflect on their upcoming experiences in advance, students can honestly examine their minds and hearts as they thoughtfully anticipate the ways in which they will be challenged in the semester ahead.

By the time students have arrived in their host culture, then, they have been given ample opportunities to reflect on the cultural other and their own biases, and have considered how to practice cultural humility, even before they have had opportunities to put it into practice. Once their feet hit the ground, however, they face the challenge of implementing those ideas, taking them from theory to reality. Recognizing they need continued guidance to help them as they navigate the many new cultural experiences they will encounter, we have designed a follow-up course, Enhancing the Study Abroad Experience. It is a one-credit online class in which students respond to journal prompts via our learning management system. The course allows us to support our students in their first weeks, especially through the difficulties of cultural shock and other transitions into the host culture. As the semester progresses, we ask students to consider how their study abroad experiences are changing them and moving them into a deeper understanding of God and His creation. Some of the journal topics we have found helpful include the following:

Week 1: One key element of cultural humility is to be open to new ideas, contradictory information and advice. In what way have these practices helped you alleviate your feelings of confusion and ignorance?

Week 3: Donald DeGraaf has compared the study abroad semester to a pilgrimage. You are pilgrims, not tourists. He writes, “A pilgrim seeks to engage the culture he or she is encountering.... They wish to participate, to be changed, to respond. Instead of trying to

consume experiences, pilgrims become part of the unfolding story around them, letting the story shape them as they learn to see the world in a different way” (24). Now that you’ve been in the host culture for three weeks, how do you see yourself as a pilgrim?

Week 6: How has your faith been challenged during your time living abroad? How is God teaching you about Himself through the cultural other?

Week 9: According to DeGraaf, “To practice cultural humility is to maintain a willingness to suspend what you know, or what you think you know, about a person based on generalization about their culture” (69). Describe your progress towards this goal of cultural competency. How is cultural humility part of that process?

Week 12: In what ways do you feel you belong to your host culture? In what ways do you feel you do not belong? In your opinion, what elements are fundamental to belonging?

Week 15: As you come to the end of the semester, what are the most important things you have learned about God? About the people of your host culture? About the people of your own culture? About yourself?

Student responses to these prompts have encouraged students to reflect more deeply on their experiences. For example,

God has shown me the importance of welcoming my neighbors and foreigners (when I return to the US), no matter where they’re from. My family here has loved me, helped me, cared for me more than I could have imagined. They’ve been so patient with me, my Spanish, and my lack of understanding the culture and life here. I have a clearer picture of how God shows this to me in many areas of my life.

The concept of cultural humility becomes experientially real to students during their time abroad. One student commented,

I think it’s difficult to recognize the different parts of your own culture without getting to know another; knowing my culture is the first step in having the ability to mature in cultural competency. As I observe and come to understand another culture, I have come to realize that other cultural practices are not variations of my culture, but complete unto themselves, beautiful and different ways of thinking, living and seeing the world.

Another student acknowledged the hard work (but worthwhile investment) required in seeking cultural competence:

Honestly, there are times that I would like to return to the US so that I can be completely comfortable in my own culture, where I know how to behave and respond to social situations and where I am not afraid of misunderstanding cultural aspects. But I know that one purpose of this semester is to learn to be competent and culturally humble. Therefore, I have to be uncomfortable sometimes and suspend what I have always believed in order to improve my ability to interact with others interculturally. It hasn’t been as easy as I had thought.

As a final assignment, students write an essay in which they reflect on their experiences and how they have left an impression on their hearts, new things they’ve learned about their host cultures and about themselves. We also ask them to consider how they will carry this new learning into their lives after re-entering their home culture. We want students to show us that this experience has not been simply an exercise in learning language and culture, but a

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transformative, life-altering opportunity that God will continue to use in their future. One student articulated a deep understanding of intercultural learning, writing the following:

This experience gives me hope that I will learn and grow much as a follower of Christ who accepts people of all cultures. I’ve made the decision to engage more in the culture of my friends. As I have learned more about their cultures, they became more important to me. I have much more to learn, and I will never understand everything, but that is OK because I’m always going to be amazed more and more by the diversity and beauty that God has created in this world.

In speaking with many colleagues at other institutions, they’ve told me that they envy my department’s ability to include these courses in our students’ curriculum. While we are truly fortunate to have them, I believe that any higher education institution can implement aspects of these courses into their students’ study abroad experiences prior to and during their time in their host cultures. Students desire opportunities to connect their experience with their learning, and as Christian educators, we are in a unique position to speak into students’ lives and help them make connections to their faith as well. I urge you to seek out opportunities in which you can pose the questions that will lead students into introspective reflection about cultural humility and how their intercultural experiences inform not only their language learning, but also their faith.

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