Critical Literacy in London:

Developing Preservice Teachers’ Critical Literacy During Study Abroad

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Abstract

While international study offers a number of potential positive outcomes to participants, study abroad may be particularly beneficial for preservice teachers, in part because of the opportunity to engage in the consideration and questioning crucial to the development of critical literacy. As they engage in the independent thinking and analysis of information required of critical literacy (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2011), preservice teachers are better able to understand cultural contexts, form personal connections and apply information to other situations (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011; Morrell, 2002; Morris, 2011) – all qualities they will attempt to develop in their future students (Author, 2017). During Author 2’s 2012 London summer study abroad program, Author 1 had the opportunity to examine the potential for preservice teachers’ critical literacy development through study abroad. In this article, the authors consider what was learned from that study and offer suggestions for study abroad programs interested in fostering critical literacy.

Keywords: Study abroad; critical literacy; reflective practice; preservice teacher development
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Study abroad programs have become an increasingly popular academic choice for undergraduate students in the United States, with roughly 314,400 students taking part in international programs during the 2014-2015 school year (Institute of International Education, 2016). Study abroad experiences provide a number of potential benefits to students; as they explore different cultures, students may develop both intellectually and personally by extending their worldview, acquiring different perspectives and expanding areas of interest (Dolby, 2004; Kitsantas, 2004; McKeown, 2009; Vande Berg, Paige & Lou, 2012).

Undergraduates studying a wide variety of subjects have opportunities for international study. The benefits of study abroad may be particularly beneficial for preservice teachers, however, since “the opportunity to live and work in a foreign culture provides a unique opportunity to transform preservice teachers’ ethnocentric worldviews and set them on a path towards culturally responsive teaching” (Marx & Moss, 2011, p. 36). By extension, as preservice teachers work to construct understandings of academic and personal experiences abroad, they also have the opportunity to engage in the consideration and questioning crucial to the development of critical literacy (Freire, 1970).

During Melanie’s 2012 London summer study abroad program, Emily had the opportunity to examine the potential for preservice teachers’ critical literacy development through study abroad. Here, we share what we learned from that study and offer suggestions for study abroad programs interested in fostering critical literacy.
The London Program

Melanie created the London summer study abroad program to address the academic needs and interests of undergraduate majors of English education; however, students of any major were able to participate. Seventeen undergraduates (fifteen females and two males) took part in the 2012 London program. While the majority of students were English education majors, students also represented majors in elementary education, English literature and creative writing. The program focused on the study and teaching of literature though engagement with cultural, historical and societal elements. Students took two English courses during the program. The first was a literature course focused on the connections of text, history and culture between specific works of British literature and specific locations in London (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Selection of texts used in the London program.
The second was a pedagogical course focused on topics and issues related to the teaching and learning of literature in the secondary ELA classroom. Both courses used a variety of texts, including journal articles, research chapters, short stories, poems, novels, essays, music lyrics, images and works of art. Students read works by Wilfred Owen and Virginia Woolf, listened to lyrics of The Clash and the Sex Pistols, viewed art in the National Gallery and Tate Modern, considered the architecture of St Paul’s Cathedral (see Figure 2) and the artifacts in the British Museum while they studied and applied pedagogical concepts for the secondary ELA classroom, such as text selection, student engagement, collaborative instruction, formative assessment and lesson planning.

Figure 2. Section of St Paul’s Cathedral.
During the first week of the program, students had class for five days on the campus of a large Research I university in the Midwestern United States. During this week, students had morning and afternoon class on the university campus. In the second week, the students traveled to London, where they lived for the remaining four weeks of the program. In London, students attended class in the morning (see Figure 3) and relocated to different areas of the city during the afternoon. Students engaged in various academic activities during the afternoon portion of the program, often set in national museums, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the National Portrait Gallery and the Imperial War Museum, and national institutions, such as Westminster Abbey, Hyde Park and the British Library (see Figure 4). They also participated in guided walking tours and independent explorations connected to course concepts in the afternoons. Once a week, students traveled outside the city to apply their learning in different contexts, with visits to Canterbury, Bath and the Lake District in 2012.

Figure 3. Interior of London classroom.
Student participation was a required element of the program, encompassing participation in class discussion and engagement with the experiential activities. The program also included a significant reading load, with the 2012 program requiring four novels, one play, twelve excerpts/chapters, and thirty-five poems for the literature course, as well as one textbook and twenty-two chapters/articles for the pedagogical course.

Although program coursework varied in each iteration of the program, one assignment was consistent: the reflection journal. Students kept a journal throughout the program to reflect on the experience of studying and learning abroad. This journal was separate from other course materials in order to be easily accessible during program activities, since students wrote multiple times in the journal on a daily basis, both in and out of class. While some prompts were “free-writes” determined by students’ interests, most prompts were assigned to support and extend students’ consideration of course concepts, with reflections addressing concepts such as
• How will you be different in London? What does that mean to you?
• How does your evolving understanding of London influence your reading of *Oliver Twist*?
• Identify 2-3 visual images that have grabbed your attention since arriving in London.

  What meaning do these images have for you? (see Figure 5 for an example)

![St Paul’s Cathedral at night](image)

*Figure 5. Visual image example: St Paul’s Cathedral at night.*

**Why study abroad for preservice teachers?**

Once viewed as an addition to education, study abroad has increasingly become part of the overall educational experience (Rubin, 1996), in part due to the increasing globalization of education, economy and communication (Zhang, 2011). This rising interest in international study allows students to participate in cross-cultural experiences that have the ability to develop their global understandings of complex issues (Cushner, 2009; Kitsantas, 2004; Malewski & Phillion, 2009). Study abroad can support students’ personal development in multiple areas, expanding and strengthening their maturity, self-awareness, resilience, openness, flexibility and personal
autonomy (Kitsantas, 2004; Johnson & Battalio, 2008; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008.) The ability to live and learn in a “foreign” location offers “a deepening, informing, and enlivening educational experience brought about by a period of living and learning on the terms of a culture that is not the students’ own” (Hoffa, 2007, p. 79).

These potential benefits are particularly meaningful for preservice teachers. As Dewey (1938) recognized, “there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (p. 7). Experiences with diverse and different locations, communities, peoples and peers can positively develop preservice teachers’ perspectives on the diversity of race, class and gender to be found in their future classrooms (Boyd et al., 2006; Cushner, 2009; Malewski & Phillion, 2009; Marx & Moss, 2011). Experiential education can enhance “intercultural sensitivity and competence” (Wagenknecht, 2011, p. 137), supporting preservice teachers in reconsidering “their own cultural frames of reference and their thinking about teaching students they serve in their classrooms in the U.S.” (Boyd et al., 2006, p. 336).

One key support for student learning during study abroad is engagement in reflective practice, which is also a necessary component of effective teaching (Zeichner & Liston, 2013). As defined by Dewey (1960), reflection is an "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9), grounded in the attitudes of open-mindedness, whole-heartedness and responsibility. Through reflection, preservice teachers have the ability to critically consider their experiences during study abroad, examining beliefs and questioning perspectives as they create meaning and integrate knowledge (Itin, 1999; Shoffner, 2008; 2009). As such, reflection allows preservice teachers to develop new understandings that can be applied to future experiences, supporting their growth as autonomous individuals (Fox, 2008).
**Why Critical Literacy for Preservice Teachers?**

Conceptions of literacy in the classroom today have expanded in response to many historical, political, cultural, social, visual and technological factors (Kallus & Ratliff, 2011; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2011; Shoffner, 2010), supporting the development of student skills as diverse as technological proficiency, problem solving, collaboration, communication and cross-cultural relationships (NCTE, 2013). Understanding literacy as multifaceted and multimodal supports the “changing and flexible nature of literacies” (Shoffner, 2010, p. 76) that, in turn, mimics “the increasingly interconnected world in which we live and work” (Bruce, 2007, p. 8).

Emerging from the work of Paulo Freire (1970), critical literacy requires preservice teachers to actively engage in the construction of critical thought to examine their ongoing development and “reveal the subjective positions from which [they] make sense of the world and act in it” (Shor, 1999, p. 2). As they engage in the independent thinking and analysis of information required of critical literacy (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2011), preservice teachers are better able to understand cultural contexts, form personal connections and apply information to other situations (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011; Morrell, 2002; Morris, 2011) – all qualities they will, in turn, attempt to develop in their future students (Shoffner et al, 2017). Through critical literacy, students question “why things are the way they are” and act “on the new knowledge gained from pushing beyond and addressing that question” (Shannon, 2007, p. 1). As they learn to critically examine texts, they also learn to critically examine the world around them.

One element of critical literacy is the understanding of cultural context. In reading a text, students use critical literacy skills to grasp necessary historical background and cultural, political
and economic contexts to develop a richer understanding of the text itself (hooks, 2012; Morrell, 2002). They are able to question and consider topics, concepts or issues from different perspectives and consider different points of view (Behrmann, 2006; Freire, 1970; hooks, 2010; Xu, 2007), which, in turn, support their ability to “push past the surface meaning to examine the social meanings of texts” (Shannon, 2007, p. 1). Cultural context also takes into account the language of the text, encouraging students to examine the author’s use of language in order to better understand the themes within a text (Behrmann, 2006; Xu, 2007).

A second element of critical literacy is the formation of personal connections. Rather than reading a text in isolation, students interact with a text through connections to personal experiences, histories, ideas, attitudes and patterns (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011; Rosenblatt, 1995). As students interact with the text on a personal level, they relate the text to their own lives and develop a better understanding of and relationship with the text (Rosenblatt, 1995). In developing a personal understanding of the text, students are better able “to articulate and act on the complex relationships between knowledge, experience, reflection, and engagement” (Morris, 2011, p. 287).

A third element of critical literacy is that of textual application. Rather than reading a text as an isolated activity, students learn to apply their reading to different subjects, settings and contexts, using what they have learned as “portable knowledge” (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011, p. 447). By applying their textual understanding to other experiences, both academic and personal, students learn to grasp multiple perspectives (NCTE, 2013) and discover global themes and engage in multicultural practices (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011).
A Methodological Overview

Emily used qualitative case study methods (Creswell, 2007) to explore the potential relationship between study abroad and preservice teachers’ critical literacy development. Content analysis (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010; Creswell, 2007) was used to identify key moments and recurrent themes, while analytical read-throughs (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and a second round of analysis generated themes. In keeping with case study methodology, a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2007) was used to determine participants. Because of the number of students in the program, students were randomly divided into two groups for the Dickens’ novel study, with one group reading *Oliver Twist* and the other reading *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The nine students reading Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* were either elementary or ELA preservice teachers, making them the purposeful choice for the case study.

Three forms of data were collected during the five weeks of the study abroad program: class observations, interviews, and reflection journals. Two class observations took place in the London academic facility. In addition to Emily’s field notes, each class session was audio-recorded for later transcription. These two classes were chosen because students were engaged with their assigned Dickens novel, consequently grouping the nine preservice teachers for separate discussions and in-class activities. As noted earlier, all students completed a reflection journal as part of the program curriculum. At the conclusion of the program, photocopies of these journals were made for academic purposes, making the nine preservice teachers’ journals available for analysis.

Emily interviewed the nine preservice teachers once toward the end of the program using active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997), with interviews lasting roughly 20 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded for later transcription. Four questions (below) were asked of all
preservice teachers, while subsequent topics and questions were determined by their responses:

(1) What has impacted you the most about being in London? (2) What disconnections, if any, are you experiencing while in London? (3) In what ways has the reflection journal helped you connect with your experiences in London? (4) How did the Dickens walking tour and the Dickens exhibit influence your reading of *Oliver Twist*?

**Developing Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy requires students to develop understandings of cultural contexts, make personal connections between texts and experiences, and apply these learned concepts to other contexts (Behrman, 2006; Freebody & Freiberg, 2011; Morrell, 2002; Morris, 2011; Shannon, 2007; Xu, 2007). While studying in London, the preservice teachers were engaged in experiences that developed their critical literacy skills by extending their contextual knowledge in ways that created personal connections and offered different perspectives.

While in London, the preservice teachers connected their experiences to an understanding of the historical contexts, social relations and issues of diversity all around them, from the class texts to the city itself. In terms of critical literacy, the preservice teachers were developing their understanding of “the socially constructed meaning embedded in texts” (Morrell, 2002, p. 78) and applying that understanding to the world around them. For example, several noted different perspectives on previously studied subjects: “I took this British Literature class first semester of last year, so I read everything and now being able to actually see it, it makes such a difference, it really does. And now I’m looking back to all of those [texts] and being like, ok, that’s what it meant.”

When discussing *Oliver Twist*, one preservice teacher explained how the Dickens walking tour helped her to understand his possible purpose for writing a novel featuring a poor
boy in the city; seeing the crooked alleyways of London’s streets and learning about Dickens’ childhood work in a blacking factory extended her understanding of the text. Another preservice teacher saw that “being in [London] helped me to understand some of the social relevance of Dickens’ text,” providing “a glimpse of how [Londoners at the time] thought and what important messages [the author] wanted the audience to understand.”

The preservice teachers demonstrated a developing ability to “explore a topic, concept, or an issue from multiple perspectives” (Xu, 2007, p. 18) while studying in London. By recognizing their surprise at the city’s diversity, they turned a critical eye on their previous understandings: “When you think of London, or England in general, you think of White people with British accents, but then you get here, and you’re like, ‘Wow, this is a huge melting pot.’” By expanding their contextual understanding of London, they were able to see how “it just completely changed how I read [the text]; the environment totally made a difference,” whether on the streets or in the theatre.

After attending a performance of Henry V at the Globe Theatre (see Figure 6), a preservice teacher admitted that “it was funny to look up at the people in the comfortable seats and see what the class divide would have been like.” As groundlings, the preservice teachers stood during the three-hour performance on a concrete curtain in front of the protruding stage, far removed from the benches and cushions available to those with more expensive tickets. She saw that the experience allowed her to “gain more of an understanding of the effects of the classes in society.” In terms of critical literacy, she was able to “push past the surface meaning” (Shannon, 2007, p. 1) of attending the play to question the larger issues of socioeconomic status.
The personal connections necessary for developing critical literacy also supported the preservice teachers’ developing personal awareness: “I have a better understanding of my own culture and [the program] helped me to continue to explore and keep an open mind.” As they reflected on their experiences, they were able to inhabit a “critical consciousness” (Morris, 2011, p. 287) that applied their academic learning to their personal development. As one preservice teacher explained, “I never expected to learn so much about myself, either, like the kind of person I really am and how I interact with people.” Another noted that her learning during the
program encouraged her to return to the United States with “a completely different outlook on my career, on my studies, on everything.”

The preservice teachers recognized that the London program connected to and expanded their personal experiences and understandings of the texts they studied (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011; Rosenblatt, 1995). Referring to Dickens’ work, many commented that their engagement with the author while in London created a more positive response to his writing: “I started reading Oliver Twist before we came here and I just thought that it was really difficult to get through. But when we met [the Dickens’ walking tour guide] it just humanized him, and it just makes it so much easier to read the book.” Creating a personal connection between the text and the experience made the novel, and by extension, the author, more accessible: “I wasn’t as resistant to it. Dickens became a person instead of some dead guy I couldn’t relate to.”

Preservice teachers pointed to this same accessibility when they experienced the play Henry V at The Globe. In prior discussions, they had expressed little liking of the play; after the performance, however, they commented on both personal and emotional connections. One preservice teacher noted that “I fell in love with all the [characters] in a way that I never could have reading the text alone,” while another enthused, “My pen can’t even write the words to describe seeing and being engaged with Henry V at the Globe.” Creating personal connections between experience and text made the difficult texts of Shakespeare and Dickens accessible, which further developed the preservice teachers’ critical literacy skills: “I didn’t think I was going to like it because I have had bad encounters with Dickens before but I actually enjoyed his novel.”
Supporting Critical Literacy During Study Abroad

The academic experience of study abroad can provide the opportunity to develop critical literacy skills as students apply newfound understandings to extend contextual understandings and create personal connections. For students who are also preservice teachers, study abroad’s support for critical literacy is doubly important, given the need to develop such skills in their future students (Shoffner et al., 2017). Not being a fixed outcome, however, study abroad leaders must consider how to intentionally incorporate support for critical literacy development within a study abroad program.

Study abroad leaders must make clear the connections between academics and activities in order to support the critical analysis of new information and experiences (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2011). For preservice teachers to successfully experience (Dewey, 1938) opportunities for critical literacy development, then, they must see how their international study connects to educational outcomes, course materials and academic assignments. The connections between course concepts and program experiences can be quite clear: visiting a museum exhibit or examining an original text to support the study of a particular text. Other connections between concepts and experiences can be less clear-cut: examining specific monuments and memorials for a discussion concerning issues of race, class and gender (see Image 6) or analyzing specific works of art and music against the context of a historical figure. To create such connections, study abroad leaders must be familiar with the study abroad location as academic setting, possessing the ability to create assignments and encourage explorations that support preservice teachers’ critical literacy.
Preservice teachers must also engage in daily reflection (Dewey, 1960) throughout their study abroad program. As experiential learning, study abroad requires students to engage “intellectually, emotionally, socially, politically, spiritually, and physically in an uncertain environment where the learner may experience success, failure, adventure, and risk taking” (Itin, 1999, p. 93). Such an environment encourages the active, persistent and careful consideration required of reflective thinking (Dewey, 1960). Study abroad leaders can integrate opportunities for preservice teachers to reflect on their experiences, whether through individual reflection (e.g.,
a personal journal, reflective essays) or collaborative reflection (e.g., a class weblog, class
discussion), that support new understandings and encourage different perspectives.

By making new connections and considering different perspectives while studying abroad, preservice teachers can use their developing critical literacy skills to engage in the consideration, analysis and application necessary for reflective teaching (Zeichner & Liston, 2013). In developing their critical literacy skills, preservice teachers have the opportunity to develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of text, environment and self. By intentionally addressing the development of critical literacy, study abroad leaders can add to the many benefits already available to students immersed in international study.
References


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