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Expanding Worlds: Studying Abroad as Teachers

© Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko

SUNY Brockport

© Kathleen Olmstead

SUNY Brockport

© Mitchell Lalik

SUNY Brockport

© Heather Mufford

SUNY Brockport

© Reed Sanchez

SUNY Brockport

Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to Kathleen Olmstead, Assistant Professor of Literacy and Literacy, SUNY Brockport, 294 Albert W. Brown Building, Brockport, NY 14420

Contact: kolmstead@brockport.edu

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to explore American students' experiences of a faculty-led study abroad program in France and in England. The authors describe the beneficial aspects of study abroad for in-service and preservice teachers—including developing intercultural understandings necessary for teachers to create culturally relevant spaces in their current and future classrooms. This work may also provide faculty with considerations for implementation of future study abroad programs.

Keywords: Study abroad, literacy, culture, travel, international, intercultural understandings

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Expanding Worlds: Studying Abroad as Teachers

My childhood was filled with the smells of plane exhaust and memories of reading books while sitting on suitcases. I hear snippets of my memories in other languages. Sometimes it is my first- grade language teacher in Morocco describing the life cycle of a praying mantis in French. In Bolivia I can remember my fifth- grade Spanish teacher scolding me for not rolling my tongue correctly. In France, I can recall arguing with our neighborhood baker over which baguette I wanted.

-Reflection, Kate

These are the memories of a third culture kid (TCK): The memories of a childhood immersed in cultures other than her passport culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Memories of a child who attended American schools with large numbers of international students. Kate’s TCK identity is a central pillar of her teaching and her practice. Understandings of students as individuals is paramount to her pedagogy, and thus resulted in her hopes of crafting a study abroad experience that would support the need for all students to grow and learn as global citizens. In summer 2017, Kate was invited to participate in a literature-based study abroad experience to Scotland with eleven students. She worked with her colleague, a fellow literacy professor, to codevelop a meaningful program. Scotland was selected because the cooperating professor had familiarity and connections to educators in Scotland. However, when the time came to develop her own program, as a TCK, she wanted to allow for multiple cultural contexts. In collaboration with Kathy, the literacy professors developed an education-centered study abroad experience that focused on how practicing and pre-service teachers could use their participation in study abroad to expand both their mindset and their approaches to teaching in diverse schools and classrooms.

Study Abroad as Transformative Learning

Participation in study abroad programs has flourished as students seek to become more engaged in course-related travel experiences (Walters et al., 2017). Research indicates studying abroad can be highly influential—impacting students’ learning by increasing self-sufficiency, building students’ intercultural understandings and enhancing their development as global citizens (He et al., 2017; Kitsantas, 2004; Walters et al., 2017). Indeed, Perry et al. (2012) suggest that study abroad is a *transformative experience* for students as they engage with a variety of new places, new languages, and cultures—leading students to confront and perhaps rethink pre-existing beliefs as they engage with others and reflect critically on their experiences. Furthermore, researchers Lo-Philip et al. (2015) suggest study abroad experiences enable students to become more “critically aware of their own biases” and “become more culturally sensitive” (p. 231). Study abroad as a *transformative learning experience*, then, may be viewed as beneficial to future and current teachers working with an increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse students, achieved by enhancing teachers’ abilities to create culturally responsive learning environments in their classrooms (He et al., 2017) Therefore, we want to add to the conversation, providing voices from our students who’ve gained new understandings that can be applied to their future classrooms.

Context

Study abroad experiences can have a positive impact on the college students who participate in them—particularly on teachers—and these experiences have become increasingly popular (Walters et al., 2017). Thus, in the summer of 2019, Kate and Kathy, two Literacy faculty members from a small public state college in Western New York, led six undergraduate and five graduate students in a ten-day study abroad learning experience to Paris, Lille and

London. Students were able to select a course track from the options below to best fit their plan of study:

- Track 1: OAP 504— *General Education Study Abroad*
- Track 2: EDI 699— *Literacy Elective* (for graduate Literacy students)
- Track 3: EDI 601— *Diversity in Education*

Readings, assignments, and course projects were differentiated for each track to meet the objectives of each course.

Table 1

Study Abroad Course Learning Objectives

Track	Course Objectives
All	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To provide students with the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge and experience of the language, culture and customs of France and England. ● To facilitate personal development through gaining intercultural sensitivity, feeling more connected to the wider worlds of education, art, and literature. ● To develop independence, confidence, and self-knowledge through international travel. ● To experience short-term living in different cultures, exposure to different learning environments, increased knowledge of another part of the world, and interaction with local residents. ● To develop collegiate-level reading and writing skills.
Track 1: Education Specific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To investigate school practices in England and France, exploring preschool through post-secondary levels. ● To develop understandings of language learning and literacy acquisition through immersion in countries with differing dialects and languages. ● To investigate the roles of multimodal literacies abroad. ● To examine the diversity within public schools in the United States and abroad. ● To explore how understandings of literacy learning are shaped by experiences with other cultures.

Track	Course Objectives
Track 2: Literacy Elective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize, describe and analyze varied concepts and processes through text analysis (readings, journals, discussions) • Demonstrate the ability to analyze (and graduate students will research) historical texts and engage in criticism (journals, discussions, grad presentations) • Explore connections between cultures through explorations of narrative and nonfiction texts and present their learning through a variety of written and technological methods • Explore new ideas and learning through reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities. • Understand the impact of physical, perceptual, emotional, social, cultural, environmental, and intellectual factors on learning, language development, and reading acquisition. • Demonstrate the ability to use technology to enhance teaching and learning.
Track 3: Diversity in Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand how student and teacher backgrounds affect learning and teaching • Examine how racial, ethnic, language, cultural, social-class, gender, sexual orientation, ability and religious identity is constructed and the implication for teaching and learning • Examine the diversity within public schools in the United States and abroad • Demonstrate knowledge of research relevant for culturally responsive teaching • Develop a personal philosophy of diversity education that addresses the role of the teacher, students, families, community, instruction and assessment, and environment.

Itinerary

With the help of a study abroad-focused travel company, Kate and Kathy were able to design a program to meet the learning objectives of the courses as well as the needs and interests of their students. The professors selected locations based on student interest, faculty knowledge, and recommendations from the International Studies Office. Table 2 is an abbreviated version of the program itinerary to capture key highlights of our travels.

Table 2*Itinerary*

Place	Time	Learning Experience
Paris, France	3 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walking Tours: Champ de Mars, Tour Eiffel, Ecole Militaire, walk by American University of Paris Campus, Trocadéro, walk along the Seine, Champs Elysées, L’Arc de Triomphe, Les Invalides, Ponte Alexandre III, Jardin des Tuileries, Musée D’Orsay • Museums: Louvre • Key Sites: Sainte-Chapelle & Notre Dame • Cultural Experiences: Traditional French dinner, Lecture from local professor about Parisian history
Lille, France	3 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walking Tours: Lille’s stunning city-centre area, Architectural history tour, Librairie Furet du Nord • Cultural Experiences: Tour and discussion of Universite Catholic, Lecture by professor of French regional culture vs. Parisian culture, Walking guided tours by local teacher
London, England	4 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walking Tours: Guided tour of King’s College, Covent Garden, Jack the Ripper Tour, Harrods • Museums: Victoria & Albert Museum, National Portrait Gallery “Late Shift”, The British Museum • Unique Experiences: Day trip to Stratford Upon Avon, Harry Potter Set Universal Studios • Cultural Experiences: Traditional English pub meal

Student Reflections

In the following section, three graduate students, Mitch, Heather and Reed, share reflections of their study abroad learning experiences as a result of their research, reflection and travel through Paris, Lille, and London.



Figure 1. Study Abroad Student Memories (authors' own photos).

Reflections of a Spanish Teacher Studying Abroad by Mitch

As a Spanish teacher, I believe that one of the best ways I can enhance my understanding as a professional is to go out and explore the world around me. Working in a rural school district with limited linguistic and cultural diversity, I understand and am aware of my responsibility as an educator to give my colleagues insight on working with students with language diversity. I wanted to learn more about the challenges that these students experienced in England and France in order to compare to the challenges that non-native English speakers in my school district face, such as an absence of classroom experiences that reflect their culture or background knowledge. Having previously studied abroad as an undergraduate student, this second graduate-level trip became much more academic in nature and allowed me to select a topic that sparked my interest over time. As a graduate student focusing on TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages), I wanted to enhance my understanding of second language acquisition and learn how students in other countries become part of their school and community culture. As a lens for my research, I decided to focus on culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in England and France and compare my findings abroad to my own understandings of the experiences of English Language Learners in the United States. CLD students are “individuals whose culture or language differs from that of the dominant group” (Herrera, 2015, p. 3). I specifically targeted

the roadblocks that are currently in place for CLD learners in both England and France, and also created potential professional development practices that future teachers could utilize to be responsive towards CLD students' cultural, social, and emotional needs.

By completing a fair amount of research before leaving for the study abroad journey, I already had an expectation of what I would be investigating throughout my travels. The most profound takeaway I had is that even abroad, many schools consider allowing students to use their L1s (heritage languages) as detrimental to a student's literacy skills and cognitive development (Welply, 2017, p. 438). CLD students deserve teachers who utilize their experiences and first language to design classroom activities that engage, motivate, and include students of all different backgrounds. In my own teaching, I have prioritized making connections with my students as an avenue for understanding their experiences and making learning more personal to them. Simple strategies such as learning key words in a CLD student's primary language, celebrating holidays and special events in the classroom, and implementing positive family communication helps affirm student identity and eliminates the barriers that are often in place for students who come from families that speak languages other than English. After returning to my school in New York this year, I have also been able to work 1-on-1 with mainstream teachers and provide appropriate scaffolds in order to help students who are culturally and linguistically diverse be more successful and engaged students.

Another comparison I was able to draw through my travel experience and its associated research is that there is simply not enough appropriate professional development offered to help teachers become better advocates for their CLD students. According to Nieto (2013), "all teachers would be in a better position to work effectively with low- income students of color if they received appropriate preparation, but this is not always the case" (p. 23). As we become a

more global society and the number of CLD students continues to grow, we as educators cannot remain stagnant in this area of academic growth. Teachers can lobby for this type of professional development by speaking to their administration regarding the beneficial professional development opportunities that support teachers in understanding and developing more positive schooling experiences for CLD students. My own district will allow teachers to lead their own type of professional development and will even compensate teachers for doing so.

Culturally responsive teaching is such a critical mindset that all teachers need to make sure each and every student feels respected and welcome in their classrooms. Taking this course abroad helped me understand the challenges CLD students face on a more global scale and helped me become aware of what students in other countries may experience before moving to the United States. I am truly humbled to have had this experience to grow both professionally and personally and hope that I can continue to make a difference in the lives of students who are acquiring new languages.

From Small Towns to Big Cities: A New View of the World: Reflection by Heather

I grew up in a small, rural town where most, dare I say everyone looked and spoke like me. I am grateful to have returned to this town to teach, and I am happy to see that our diversity is growing. Sadly, the culture surrounding this diversity has changed very little. As an educator, I feel an obligation to teach my students empathy and responsibility, and to prepare them to be culturally competent beings.

-Reflection, Heather

Because I grew up in a small rural community, I understand that many of my students do not experience cultures outside of their own or experience them in stereotypical ways through school curricula. It was not until I went to college that I began to see the world differently and realize that diversity was to be celebrated and honored, rather than simply studied. As a result, it is my highest priority to expose my students to the diverse cultures beyond our hometown in

preparing them for their future. My study abroad experience has become an invaluable tool for communicating the importance of global experience with my students. This study abroad trip enhanced my intercultural understandings and permitted me to share my learning with my class.

Throughout my time in London and France, I was exposed to many new experiences. I learned what it might be like to attend a French university, explored French art, and learned to navigate the London Underground. I also learned the challenges of communicating when you are not a native speaker. Additionally, I learned about the hidden power of language as some of my points and ideas did not carry the same meaning in different cultural contexts. These experiences were at times uncomfortable, but ultimately constructive. One of the most impactful experiences was being immersed in a language of which I knew very little. I could hear the hum of communication, but gathered little meaning as I walked down streets, sat on the metro, and idled in the hotel lobby. Nonetheless, I appreciated the beauty of the language being spoken. There were certainly times when this language barrier made things difficult, like trying to find something at the local pharmacy. But as I reflected after the trip, I realized how important language is to a culture. It is a large part of the identity of a group of people, and therefore holds a great amount of value. As Nieto (2013) suggests, good teachers realize that “language and culture are assets not to be wasted or disparaged” (p. 91).

The above experiences impacted my teaching practices. I have learned that as teachers, we need to stress the importance of language as a monumental piece of cultural identity. We need to allow our students who speak another language to use it in conjunction with their learning of English. Finally, we need to create an interest for our students in learning another language. The process of learning another language is a window into another culture. If we are to raise citizens equipped to engage with this increasingly diverse world, we have to ensure that

students have opportunities to experience other cultures. To do this, we must be able to have these experiences ourselves, and I can think of nothing more valuable to reach this goal than being totally immersed in culture as I was on this study abroad trip.

This study abroad experience has affirmed my culturally responsive mindset—in which I make a conscious effort to respect and honor students’ cultures, experiences, and histories while affirming their identities and expanding their world (Nieto, 2013). While I especially focus on the cultures represented in my classroom, I also understand the value of exposing the students to a variety of cultures. Sharing my experiences from this trip with my students starts conversations that are effective in urging students toward considering and valuing other cultures.

Unfortunately, “society is structured in ways that make us all complicit in systems of inequality” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 4). Rather than believing that this makes our efforts futile, we need to embrace the idea that changing the way we teach students will help expose our structural inequalities so we can change them. We need to nurture students to embrace their cultures and value others, develop within them a sense of appreciation for the diversity of the world around them, and understand that their voice is just as important and as powerful as anyone else’s.

Together we can make the change.

My Awakening: Reflection by Reed

I grew up in a predominantly White suburban community and I stuck out with my darker complexion and jet- black hair. I have always identified as Hispanic but living in New York, I didn’t really know what that meant. I started to believe the negative stereotypes that surrounded the culture of Hispanics; I started to feel ashamed of my culture. It wasn’t until I got to high school where I started to explore my culture and that I came to the realization of what it meant to be Hispanic. Entering the education field, I knew that I never wanted my students to feel the way I did growing up. In order to fully understand the deep values of every culture, I knew that I needed to travel around the world and study as well as experience the cultures that are out there. That’s how

my love of education and traveling became fused as one. I want to travel and bring these experiences to my classroom. I want my students to feel connected, known, and understood. I want them to be competent beings.

-Reflection, Reed

I had the privilege to attend a study abroad program and visit Lille, Paris, and London. While in Europe, we were able to explore various sites that allowed us to examine each location's culture and history. For example, we visited the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Universite Catholique de Lille, The Courtauld Institute of Art, Stratford-Upon-Avon, and so much more. Visiting these educational and culturally meaningful places allowed me to begin to understand the differences among the United States, France, and England.

Before I went on this trip, I conducted research on a variety of European educational systems and how they addressed cultural topics through standards and objectives in their curricula. While I found evidence of interculturalism (Negru, 2015), I also realized that we need to continue to promote a focus on disrupting marginalization. For example, when I visited the children's sections in bookstores in France and London, I quickly became aware of the lack of diverse characters in stories displayed on the shelves of the bookstores. I realized we need more representation in children's books in France, England, and the United States.

While in Paris and Lille I realized that I had not readily prepared myself for the culture differences that were in store for me. One culture shock was the language in Lille and Paris. It was overwhelming to hear nothing but French for six days. Language is a huge component of a culture and as I walked the streets, I began to appreciate the language and the culture that surrounded me. However, I realized that I should have been exposed to more diversity or that I should have even taught myself about the various cultures that exist outside of my own. When we are exposed to languages and cultures, we become more open to diversity and in turn become

more active citizens (Maad & Ridha, 2016). We have the duty as individuals, citizens, and teachers to expose not only ourselves to other cultures but also our students.

Once we learn and incorporate aspects of honoring cultures in our classrooms, we become culturally responsive and create social justice classrooms (Nieto, 2013). Once we understand a culture's deep beliefs, we can create classrooms that absorb the knowledge and begin to understand how culture affects everyone. Before a teacher can begin to teach their students about the deep levels of cultures, language, and religion, teachers must first as an individual self-reflect on their beliefs. You must become aware of your own positionality by discovering your implicitly known social norms and challenging yourself on what they mean (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). I want to use this knowledge to teach my students how to be social justice activists and global citizens.

Considerations for Faculty Planning A Study Abroad

Based upon student feedback and faculty reflections, we have the following considerations for other faculty planning short-term study abroad experiences for students:

- **Reflection**—Build in ways to ensure students think critically about their learning. Consider live discussions and electronic discussion boards, reflective journals and the creation of travel blogs, video reflections, experienced- based professional development and more. Since our study abroad supported future and current teachers, it was important for our student educators to engage in reflection that raised understandings about curricular choices, avoiding reinforcing stereotypes, and harmful practices (Kuby, 2013).

- ***Thoughtful selection of meaningful places to visit***—Like any educational trip, there are likely many amazing places to explore. Select important locations to visit based on learning objectives, course content, and student interests.
- ***Disrupting cultural deficit views***—Make time to discuss cultural differences and explore how different places do things differently. This can help quell students' negative or misplaced remarks when they experience frustration around cultural difference. Encourage students to thoughtfully consider and reconsider their pre-conceived notions and biases so they may embrace culturally sustaining practices (Paris & Alim, 2017).
- ***Free time***—Make time for students to explore and engage with places and spaces salient to their own learning and interests for the course to increase what Reeve (2013) calls agentic engagement.
- *For teacher educators—***Make space to discuss diversity in schools*** (Nieto, 2013)—We hosted a multitude of guest speakers and planned lectures ourselves. Make time to talk about schooling similarities and differences around the world and how this pertains to teacher education students' current or future classroom teaching.

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Author Bio: Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko is an Assistant Professor of Literacy and Literacy B-12 Co-Program Coordinator in the Department of Education and Human Development at SUNY Brockport. Before she became a professor, Dr. Yurko worked as a secondary English Language Arts teacher. At present, she teaches multiple undergraduate and graduate literacy and education courses. Her research interests include young adult literature, secondary ELA teaching, preservice teacher education, and topics related to adolescent literacy.

Author Bio: Kathleen Olmstead is an Assistant Professor of Literacy and Literacy B-12 Co-Program Coordinator in the Department of Education and Human Development at SUNY Brockport. Dr. Olmstead was a longtime elementary school teacher and reading specialist. She currently teaches undergraduate courses in early literacy development and graduate courses in elementary literacy materials and methods. Dr. Olmstead's research interests include family literacy, authentic literacy practices, children's literature and teacher education.

Author Bio: Mr. Mitch Lalik is an MEd student in the TESOL program at SUNY Brockport. He is also a secondary Spanish and French language teacher in a local district.

Author Bio: Ms. Heather Mufford is an MEd student in the Literacy at SUNY Brockport. She is also a kindergarten teacher in a local district.

Author Bio: Ms. Reed Sanchez is an MEd student in the Literacy at SUNY Brockport. She is also a primary school long term substitute teacher in a local school district.