The Foreign City as Classroom: Adult Learning in Study Abroad

To live and work in today’s global community, adults need to develop an intercultural responsiveness and flexibility in order to interact sensitively in situations involving international cultural contexts, practices, beliefs, understandings, and communications. One way to support this development in adult and higher education is to offer opportunities to study abroad. These experiences can present adult learners with a setting in which to learn about global diversity and the interrelationships of issues across the world’s population today. The Institute of International Education (2009) reported that study abroad participation in American colleges and universities increased over 150% in the past ten years. Of those participants, juniors, seniors, and graduate students comprised close to 70% of the study abroad population. It is clear adults of all ages are participating in study abroad programs across US institutions of higher education.

Currently, short-term programs comprise over 50% of study abroad offerings nationally (Institute for International Education, 2009). Short-term study abroad programs typically last between one and five weeks and often include faculty-led groups of students from one or more institution. Chieffo and Griffiths (2009) reported these programs tend to be appealing to working adults and other nontraditional students. Indeed, adults may find that short-term programs fit better within their financial limitations and time constraints of work and family. However, critics sometimes question these programs with the concern that the focus may be more on travel and adventure than on academic learning objectives. Unfortunately, not all study abroad programs provide experiences with significant learning, development, and transformational outcomes (Gray, Murdock, & Stebbins, 2002; Green, 2002). However, some recent research suggests that studying abroad transforms students’ global perspectives and cross-cultural effectiveness (Dwyer, 2004) and can increase self-reliance and self-confidence (Corda, 2007).

We have very little current evidence, however, about adult learning in study abroad. Therefore, I conducted an extensive investigation that examined adult learning within the context of a short-term program in Italy. To help frame this inquiry, I looked to Wenger’s (1998) concept of learning and knowing within the social learning system of a community of practice. He suggests a community of practice is a collective learning enterprise encompassing socially-constructed practices and relations. In formal education settings, a community of practice includes instructors, learners, resources and materials, the physical setting, and a variety of cultural and social influences and behaviors that affect the learning that occurs, or does not occur (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Correspondingly, the research question guiding this component of the larger study was: What is the nature of the learning interactions (the socially-constructed practices and relations) within a short-term study abroad
community of practice? In this paper, I first offer further clarification of the adult learning theory that frames this study and provide an overview of the relevant literature. I then explain the research methodology, followed by a description of the short-term study abroad program under investigation. Finally, I present the findings of the research and the implications on what the data suggest about the nature of adult learning and communities of practice in study abroad experiences.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Situated cognition frames this study (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Situated cognition is based on Vygotsky’s (1978) social learning theory, which offers a way of understanding human decision-making and action through a sociocultural perspective. This perspective proposes that we construct knowledge both individually and together with those in the world in which we live. Lave and Wenger (1991) further suggest that learning occurs within a community of practice (CoP). They define a CoP as “a set of relations among person, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98). Wenger (1998) clarifies that CoPs are a collection of people who share a common interest and engage in a shared learning endeavor. He contends there are three conditions which must be met to constitute a CoP: the domain, the community, and the practice. The domain is described by a shared identity of interest. The community includes members who engage in interaction through activities and dialogue; they share information and develop relationships in order to learn from one another. Finally, the practice of a CoP is one which collective resources, tools, stories, and solutions are shared and utilized. It is clear that the social nature of interaction is critical to understanding learning within this framework. The interactions and learning outcomes are a function of the learning context and the specific community of practice (CoP) in which they occur. Short-term study abroad programs offer a unique situated context to investigate the complex influences on international/cross-cultural learning, as well as the nature of the communal behaviors and interactions within communities of practice in these programs.

Chieffo and Griffiths (2004) conducted an extensive study that investigated the impacts of short-term programs. They found that when compared to learners who studied at home, study abroad participants “were generally more disposed to communicating in a foreign language and considered themselves more patient with people who do not speak English well” (p. 171). They also found that these students acquired increased course-related subject matter knowledge, deepened appreciation for the foreign culture, and the ability to make comparisons between home and the host country. Orndorff (1998) found that adult learners who participated in short-term travel experiences perceived transformative changes in self-perception and intercultural understanding through their immersive experiences. Likewise, Jung and Caffarella (2010) found that adult learning in graduate study abroad produced significant cultural experiences and development. Dirkx, Spohr, Tepper, and Tons’ (2010) research, however, indicated that short-term study abroad may not always result in adult transformative learning outcomes as might be expected.

The dichotomy of these recent findings points to a need for further investigation into the nature of adult learning in these programs. Toward this end, Herbers and Mullins Nelson (2009) recently found that structured time to reflect on experiences and emotions during learning abroad can lead to significant changes in learners’ perspectives on international culture and practices. Likewise, Spencer, Murray, and Tuma, (2005) recommend designing focused and reflexive interaction with the host country and culture, with time built-in to reflect on the experience. We know that the instructional design, learning outcome objectives, and specific characteristics of a program are essential for academic and student development (Engle & Engle, 2003). However, scholars lament the enduring paucity of research on the types of learning activities, interactions, and personal transformation that actually occurs for adults in study abroad experiences (Bakalis & Joiner, 2004; Corda, 2007; Dwyer, 2004; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Paul & Mukhopadhyay, 2003).

Method

The present investigation took place over two years with two iterations of a study abroad program in Italy. The course focused on learning about Italian culture through the study of history, architectural symbols, and structures. All the students in both summer courses (22 undergraduate and 2 graduate students) agreed to participate in the study. There were six male students and 18 female students. Participant ages were between 19 and 46 years and students hailed from five different colleges. Twelve of the learners identified themselves as Hispanic, two as Vietnamese-American, one as Pakistani-American, and the remaining nine students self-identify as White or Caucasian. Nine had never traveled out of the US, seven had journeyed into Mexico, and the remaining eight participants had traveled to countries outside the US and Mexico. None had been to Italy nor studied the Italian language.
Multiple data sources were used for the triangulation of evidence. The audit trail included a-priori decisions and Institutional Review Board approval for the research activities. I took field notes during scheduled program activities, during evening debriefing sessions about each day’s learning (conducted nightly by the instructors in whole group settings), and during midterm and end of course reflection exercises. I provided a summary of the students’ input to the professors to aid them in making necessary changes based on the students’ reflections. Data from the field notes resulted in rich, thick descriptions of learning interactions as explained by participants, as well as on their learning needs, confusions, and clarifications. Individuals’ names and identifying information were not recorded during field note taking; rather, the focus of the notes was on understanding the nature of the CoP’s learning experiences and interactions throughout the two summer programs.

The participants also individually completed an anonymous open-ended individual reflection survey on specific meaningful experiences/activities at the end of the course. The survey consisted of questions about their personal feelings/understandings of global culture, of their learning about history and architecture to study global diversity, and of their personal learning takeaways (academic, social, what they learned about themselves, and any life lessons). Specifically, the questions and directions were as follows:

1. What specific activities, if any, can you recall that helped you to understand about culture and/or global diversity this semester?
2. Why do you think they were so meaningful?
3. On the back of this sheet, please jot down all of the learning “take-a-ways” you have from this course.
   Include academic, social, what you have learned about yourself, and life’s lessons.

On this survey participants often described specific interactions with course participants, with Italians, and with the academic content that they felt were important in their learning.

Data were analyzed using the constant-comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify specific codes, categories, and eventually themes across the data set. I first analyzed my field notes and the individual reflection surveys separately. I began by listing sensitizing concepts, “important features of social interaction” (Bowen, 2006, p. 3). Each item in these lists represented a learning interaction, or set of related interactions that I then examined in further iterations of the analysis. Subsequently, I analyzed the full data set to identify describing words and phrases of the elements/people/academic content that characterized the learning interactions. I then grouped the codes into categories and subcategories. Eventually the categorical analysis lead to distinguishing overarching themes, which I describe in the Findings section.

The Study Abroad Course

Course Development and Content

The objective for the study abroad program was for learners to acquire certain tools for learning about a foreign cultural community. Through the interdisciplinary study of Italian urban history and architecture, the learning objective was to learn to read Italian urban culture. The course focused on urban historical theory (an analysis of cities via geographical hierarchy, their historical relationship to each other, and the internal physical order) and urban physical form and its symbology/mythology. The three-week course was housed in various cities and towns in Tuscany, Rome, and Venice.

Before the first year of data gathering, the course was redesigned to incorporate adult learning principles. These included learning activities which allowed students to construct meaning from hands-on learning and experiences (Taylor, 2008) and to engage in dialogue and participate in collaborative learning activities that offer additional perspectives and opportunities to co-construct knowledge (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007; Vella, 2002). In addition, the instructors designed the course to provide specific learning journal prompts with time built-in for students to reflect critically on their learning (Freire, 1985; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007).

Pre-departure Preparation

A series of pre-departure meetings began in the spring semesters each year. The instructors conducted the meetings and provided students with written materials (textbooks, syllabus, itineraries, and travel documents). These meetings also offered students a chance to be introduced to the following: (a) classmates and instructors; (b) the course objectives, assignments, and assessments; (c) written information and brief lectures regarding the theories, concepts, and vocabulary to be introduced in the course; (d) an overview of Italian language and cultural practices; and (e) program logistical/itinerary information. The first year, the students and professors assembled ten times for 21 hours of pre-departure meetings. The second year, students and professors convened six times for a total of 17 hours of pre-departure meetings. Before the departure abroad, students completed a self-reflection exercise in which they described their own personal

Δ 6 Adult Learning
definitions of culture and preconceived notions about Italian urban culture. This activity provided important baseline information for the instructors and a reflective starting point for the students. The instructors then introduced the participants to a learning design that would mirror what they would experience abroad. Using the overarching theories of the course, they conducted a learning excursion in the students’ own urban setting. They visited two town squares, a city café for a brief lunch, and went on a tour at a local museum’s Greek and Roman sculpture gallery. They utilized public transportation, walked throughout the city in the summer heat, and learned how to take notes, listen to mini-lectures, and work collaboratively in small groups during the field-based learning excursion. These activities provided practice for how the students would learn abroad.

**Daily Instructional Design**

Learning activities took place beginning in the morning through early afternoon for 17 days of the 21 day course. The students had one weekend off for personal travel and two additional free days. Learning excursions to different archeological, historical, and cultural sites began with an overview of the day to come. The instructors also explained the learning objectives for the day and clarified the prompts upon which the students would reflect in their journals later that evening. Students were heterogeneously assembled into learning groups (between three to six per group) to facilitate collaborative learning opportunities and promote safety in large metropolitan areas. Throughout the day, the instructors offered mini-lectures at certain junctures in order to focus the learners’ attention to the specific details of the course content and cultural concepts. The instructors prepared the mini-lectures as a team in order for two voices of expertise to analyze and enhance the content via interdisciplinary intersections. In the evenings, the whole group assembled with the instructors to reflect and debrief on that day’s learning. These sessions provided an opportunity for learners to dialogue about their own understandings, confusions, and experiences. Learners then used the notes they took throughout the excursions and to respond to daily journal prompts. Table 1 illustrates a typical day’s schedule.

**Table 1: Daily Instructional Design**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00 AM</td>
<td>Morning Briefing: Description of daily learning objectives and site(s) to be visited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30 AM – 10:00 AM</td>
<td>Transportation to site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00 AM – 1:00 PM</td>
<td>Site visits with mini-lectures and collaborative group assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00 PM – 2:30 PM</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30 PM – 4:30 PM</td>
<td>Follow-up discussions/activities or free exploration time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:30 PM – 6:00 PM</td>
<td>Transportation back to study center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30 PM</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Dinner</td>
<td>Group debrief of day’s learning/student journal reflection entry writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Individual Feedback and Assessment**

The professors jointly met with each student individually at the midterm to provide feedback on the learning journals and offer an opportunity to clarify concepts. Assessment included four components which were weighted equally: learner participation and engagement, the learning journal responses, creation of an individual coat of arms (similar to the Italian family crests they studied in the program), and a final take-home essay. Students submitted the final essay after returning from Italy.

**Findings**

The data provided important insight about the nature of adult learning that is situated within a community of short-term study abroad practice. I characterize the domain of the CoP by a common interest shared by students and professors to learn about Italian urban culture through physical, hands-on experiences buttressed by the study of history and architecture. Participant members of the CoP were thrust quickly into the practice of the experience through intimate and intense living arrangements, long days of learning excursions, formal student grouping activities, formal and informal interactions with professors, and personal free time experiences in the foreign city. As for the community element of the CoPs, my analysis identified four major themes of interactions to be the most significant for the adult participants. These analysis themes include interactions between the learner and other
learners and professors, with the academic content, with the foreign culture/individuals, and with the learner her/himself. Each of these themes is described briefly below.

**Learner with Other Learners and Professors**
Participants indicated that both formal and informal interactions with other students were particularly meaningful. Ten individual learners specifically acknowledged in their personal reflections the significance of learning with and from other students from different backgrounds and academic disciplines. One participant disclosed, “I didn’t really think I’d make close bonds. To my surprise, I did, and because of that my experience was even more rich and vibrant.” Another suggested, “I was surprised how much I learned ... because of the dynamics of living in a different culture and interacting with different personalities of our group.” Living and learning in close contact with each other for three weeks helped them to broaden their perspectives through group discussions and to develop interpersonal skills, including “negotiation,” “compromise,” “understanding,” and “empathetic consideration” for others.

The group reflection data also indicated that relationships between students and professors provided rich opportunities for learning. The feedback the instructors got from the individual meetings and group reflection activities at the midterm led to shifts in their teaching approaches and instructional design both summers. Each summer the learners had different needs; therefore, the instructors had to be flexible and open to change. The participants were grateful for the instructors’ willingness to involve student input into the design of their learning experiences and the changes they made (i.e., explaining the journal prompts in more detail each morning or choosing to have lunch with different groups in order to offer additional discussion/help). The participants suggested that “one-on-one time with the professors” who were “passionate for the content and culture,” and “were relatable” made the experiences in the course even more meaningful. One summarized the overall feeling: “I really appreciate knowing they [the instructors] cared about our lives...[and wanted to know] how this experience has influenced us and our plans.” Spending extensive time together during the three weeks provided opportunities for students and professors to interact in more personal ways, as well as within the context of the academic content. These multifaceted interactions proved essential to the learning practice within the CoP.

**Learner with Academic Content**
This theme illustrates the combined effect of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of urban culture, reflexive individual and group activities, field-based experiences, mini-lectures, and discussions. Participants expressed an appreciation for physically experiencing and interacting with each new city, while studying the academic content gained in activities before, during, and after the experience. These activities “[brought] the city to life by the introduction of new perspectives.” One learner suggested that the design of the learning excursions and daily learning journal assignments,
gave me new insight into ideas that I already thought I had an understanding of...they enriched my understanding of the Italian people and culture in ways that I didn’t think were possible [and] brought critical reflection to the next level.

Another participant offered, “I will use central place theory and the urban culture model to be able to expunge/deduce information from sites/paintings/etc. in my professional life.” Finally, one of the students concluded, “there are reasons, cultural and political, that a certain building is created in a certain fashion. It behooves us all to take an interest in the answers to questions about the why.” The new academic content knowledge gained through these integrated activities provided learners with tools for studying and interacting not only with the Italian culture but also with other urban communities in which they may encounter.

**Learner with Native Culture/Individuals**
Participants further suggested the importance of their cross-cultural interactions with the Italian ethos and peoples. They indicated specific cultural activities were important in the learners’ developing understanding of content and international/cross-cultural diversity. These activities included learning about language basics and cultural practices in the pre-departure meetings and in discussions abroad, physically experiencing culturally important/iconic sites and museums, and staying in an apartment rather than in a hotel (“the feel of living in the city”). Participants indicated that having a variety of learning experiences in many different cities and regions provided opportunities to learn about the culture from different perspectives. Visits to historical sites, religious centers, museums, shops, restaurants and cafés, the organic winery and olive oil producer were deemed important to understanding the complexity of the academic concepts and the Italian culture. Fourteen of the participants revealed that interpersonal interactions with Italians in these situations developed their appreciation of the need for socioculturally-sensitive communication practices and foreign language skills. One commented,
“talking with people that actually live the culture and not just people who study it really gives you a good idea of what their lives are really like.” Another offered, 

On several occasions, I was either physically lost or trying to talk with an Italian about any number of subjects, and during those times I found myself becoming more immersed within the modes of Italian lifestyle and culture. [These were meaningful experiences] because they gave me a realistic, relatable, and modern experience, which provided me with true development in my understanding and use of Italian culture and language...these interpersonal, intercultural crossings have expanded my world knowledge and understanding.

A third participant explained, “It boils down to the interaction element: immersion leaves no room for insecurity, and you have to at least try communicating with others. The appreciation for the culture that’s gained in doing so makes the whole experience extremely meaningful.” Finally, one learner provided this metaphor:

Without going abroad, you simply cannot get a perspective on global culture. It’s like chocolate: I can tell you about how great it is, why I love it, and what you’ll like about it...but unless you taste it, you’ll never really understand.

This theme distinguishes the extension of learning that occurred through the union of the physical and communicative experiences the learners had while living in a foreign culture. These interactions supplemented and enhanced their learning in ways that would likely not be possible had they studied at the home campus.

**Learner with Self**

The personal choices of activities during free time, meaningful incidental learning experiences, independent self-directed learning choices, and (re)connections with personal faith systems comprise the *learner with self* theme. Fourteen participants affirmed personal growth in their individual reflections. They characterized this growth as new-found “independence,” “more courage,” “self-confidence,” “better decision making,” “being able to stick up for myself,” and “enhanced curiosity about different cultures.” Most also suggested they were committed to continued cross-cultural learning. One offered a new sense of confidence “[I can] conquer my fears – doesn’t matter what is foreign, I want to know about it now.”

In addition, half of the participants indicated that learning interactions at spiritual/religious centers in urban settings cultivated reconnections with their personal faith systems. One participant stated, 

I feel I have become closer with my religion being on this trip. Even though I go to church every Sunday, I realized how distant I’ve become with God. This trip has not only made me aware of this, but it also showed me how much more I need to learn. I’ve learned more in these three weeks than I did in many years of Sunday school and two years of Catholic school.

Participants also indicated that the learning activities in the course were significant to their personal growth, as is described here,

I did something I wouldn’t normally do, which is praying. Since I’m not a Catholic, I didn’t pray to the Saints for ceremony purpose. Instead I asked them for help to answer my questions that I struggled to answer over many years. I asked St. Margherita [Patron Saint of Cortona] to show me how she was able to find the strength [so that I may] face my fears and insecurities.

The participants suggested that the experiences in the course and with the learning community of practice led to evocative personal introspection and growth. The depiction of their development is arguably necessary for intercultural sensitivity and flexibility: increased curiosity, courage, confidence, and an awareness of how much more there is to learn about different peoples, cultures, and communities. This culminating theme of *learner with self* in many ways gets at the core of the purpose of cross-cultural adult education – learning and personal evolution that is deemed meaningful to the wider community as well as the learners themselves.

**Discussion and Implications**

The findings offer important insights about the nature of interactions within the unique learning communities of practice in short-term study abroad programs. The implications on teaching practice suggest facilitators of adult learning in these programs must re-conceive the learning design. Simply teaching a course the same way it is taught at the home campus will not take advantage of the full experience of studying abroad. Analysis signifies that the interrelationships among learners, professors, the academic content, the foreign culture and individuals, and the individual learners themselves, should anchor effective program design.

When designing a short-term program abroad, a series of preparatory meetings that concentrate on taking the mystery out of what to expect is an important step. These meetings should include discussions about the course content, learning objectives, and workload expectations.
An overview of cultural practices and some key phrases in the foreign language (if traveling to a country that speaks a language other than those which your participants speak) are particularly helpful. Participants in this study suggested these lessons helped them to feel more comfortable interacting with Italians in a variety of settings. Additionally, if learning excursions are a component of the instructional design, students may need “training” on how to learn best while on-location. If they are to take notes while on an excursion, they will likely need help to think through the best way to do so logistically. The “mock excursion” approach in the home locale was found to be very useful for this study’s learners.

Instructors also need to acknowledge the relationship they will likely have with their students while abroad. In these programs, instructors and learners often spend long hours together - during instruction, during meals, and during free time at the study center or hotel. This situation presents interaction opportunities unlike what may typically occur in a traditional learning setting. These programs, instead, offer an ideal opportunity to really get to know the participants. Instructors will have a chance to learn about their students’ lives and learning needs and to inquire about how their participants are positioning their new knowledge and perspectives within their lived experiences and future plans. Likewise, collaborative grouping exercises allow adult learners to co-construct new knowledge and perspectives in socioculturally appropriate ways. The shared resources, tools, stories, and solutions (Wenger, 1998) utilized in these collaborations support the practice of CoP members. These activities should be a substantial component of the instructional design.

Anyone who has journeyed to another country knows there are very real distractions inherent in foreign travel. Well-designed objectives and a required learning journal with reflection prompts can guide learners in producing meaningful reflexive writings concentrated within the content of the academic course. Periodic instructor feedback on these writings is essential in clarifying difficult concepts and enhancing/extending the students’ learning. Participants should also be encouraged to write about their intercultural interactions and learning takeaways that were incidental to the learning objectives, thereby connecting with the holistic educative experience to be gained in these programs.

Correspondingly, instructors must acknowledge that learning occurs inside and outside of the designed activities in these programs. Participants will be interacting and learning with the sights, sounds, smells, physical sensations, cultural practices, and foreign peoples and languages when a foreign city is the classroom. Free time is essential to a holistic learning approach in short-term study programs because it encourages learners to explore and interact without the structured “tour guide” experience and “American bubble” that learning excursions can engender (Ogden, 2006, p. 88). Engaging in authentic intercultural interactions often requires real-world problem solving and develops global sensitivities in different ways from formal learning activities.

Finally, knowledge of effective adult learning theory and practice, sustained instructional praxis, and flexible implementation were found to be imperative for facilitating adult learning in this study. One should note, however, that this study is limited in that it investigated the CoP interactions of just one program. Further research is needed to investigate additional interactional characteristics of CoPs in short-term programs in a variety of academic disciplines, in longer programs, and in nonacademic educational travel including ecotourism, agritourism, and nonprofit adult edu-travel.

References

This culminating theme of learner with self in many ways gets at the core of the purpose of cross-cultural adult education – learning and personal evolution that is deemed meaningful to the wider community as well as the learners themselves.


Note:
The term Hispanic originated from the Spanish word Hispano. While the U.S. Census Bureau (2000) defines the terms Hispanic and Latino/a as a single demographic categorization in which individuals classify themselves as Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino, individuals and communities around the US use varying self-identification terminology.