Study abroad and the creation of global citizens
American students in Europe post 9/11

Statement of Research Problem

Within the current global political and corporate climate, the US is in need of citizens that are sensitive to languages, traditions, religions, morals, and values of cultures other than their own. Perhaps the only way in which institutions can promote this sensitivity is by providing undergraduate students with the opportunity to study abroad for one or two semesters. Although time spent abroad is generally assumed to contribute to a person’s insight and understanding of cultural differences, this is not necessarily the outcome. For example, Dolby (2004) observed that, in the case of American students in Australia in 2001, some students felt the need to “blindly embrace the policies of the state, as a way of identifying with the nation” (p 168) in defense of attacks on US national and international policies by Australians. One student explains how she and her roommate became a lot more patriotic when they came back (p 167). Despite well-intended efforts to send large numbers of students abroad for the purpose of creating “global citizens”, relatively little is known about the ways in which this could best be achieved.

Pilot data gathered from UIUC in the spring 2005 indicate that “American insularity” not only forms an important reason to promote study abroad, but also complicates the integration into the host culture for American students who have had relatively little exposure to other countries, other cultures, and other languages. Current international politics and developments may very well further obstruct this process, as foreigners are often quick to confront the American with their opinions on issues such as the war in Iraq, which may create a somewhat hostile environment. Evaluations of study abroad programs seem to be limited to counting the numbers of students participating and their responses and suggestions after the experience. However, it is a much more complex exercise to link evaluations directly to the UIUC objective of “creating global citizens”. A student’s positive experiences abroad do not necessarily reflect an increase cultural awareness, while more intensive struggles and confrontations may initiate a thinking process that continues well beyond return to the home country.
Statement of Proposed Research

In the proposed study, I intend to question the assumed benefits of study abroad as defined by education administrators as well as by students themselves and their families. Through participating in study abroad programs as an observer, I will examine the students’ interactions with people from the host country and their associated responses. I will continuously evaluate their opinions and standpoints on the host culture as well as their own culture. The research will contribute to an understanding of how, in addition to cultural barriers, language and political barriers play a role in shaping the students’ experiences. The main questions that will be addressed in this study are: Does study abroad help to create “global citizens”? What kind of experiences and emotions during and after the time abroad contribute or obstruct the “desired” end goal?

Site Selection

It will be especially interesting to contrast students’ experiences in England and France for two reasons: language and politics. In this regard, England can be expected to be a more accessible and friendly environment, while the students may encounter more problems in France. British people are perhaps less likely to confront American students with problems related to US foreign politics, in specific the war in Iraq, or will do so in a less aggressive way, due to the fact that their own government has closely cooperated with the US in these matters. In addition, the students may be better able to engage in such discussions, as they are held in their native language.

On the other hand, the French government has strongly and actively opposed the US actions in Iraq, which may provide French citizens who are in support of their government’s opposition with more legitimacy and confidence to confront Americans with their opinions. A student who spent the spring 2004 semester in France, and whom I interviewed as part of the pilot project, indicated that the French people she met would very quickly start a conversation about the war in Iraq. Emily consistently avoided such confrontations by replying that she was not interested in engaging in these conversations (“But I wouldn’t give it to them.”).

A comparative study of the students’ experiences at these two sites will prove extremely valuable in gaining insight in how the certain barriers shape the students’
perception of and sensitivity to other cultures. It is possible that, for some individual students, exactly such difficulties as those possibly encountered in France will make them better “global citizens”, while an easier integration into British culture might limit the lessons learned. Despite all the difficulties she encountered in France, Emily is excited to travel again (“More than I ever did before.”).

**Methodology**

The first three months of the study will be spent at UIUC to carry out interviews with employees at the Office of the Associate Provost of International Affairs, the Study Abroad Office, other campus study abroad initiatives, and past and future study abroad students and their families. Through these interviews, I intend to gather information on objectives, goals, and expectations for institutions and individuals, as well as on sources and requirements of scholarships and measures of evaluation of the study abroad program. Interviews with students who went abroad more than two years ago will provide insight into the more long-term effects of study abroad, such as for example a slow progress of cultural sensitivity that perhaps would not have been recognized directly after the event. In this way, I can complement the short-term data collection during the semester abroad. I will not only carry out individual interviews with the students, but also focus groups with them and their families. These focus groups will enhance my understanding of the students’ backgrounds and their relationships with parents and siblings through analysis of the communication patterns between them, and it will provide a different setting in which new topics may be brought up and explored in different ways (Balshem, 1993: 39-45; Morgan, 1988: 1-17).

I intend to spend one semester with UIUC students in London and one semester in Paris and participate in classes, live in dorms or host families, in accordance with the students’ choices, and participate in their social activities. I will carry out interviews and focus groups once halfway through the semester and once towards the end of the semester to monitor the progress of the students’ integration into the culture and their thought processes over time. During interviews and focus groups, I will pay special attention to the ways the students formulate their stories and define problems or struggles (e.g. though the use of certain keywords, loaded terms, and hesitations in speech).
Another exercise that will prove especially useful towards the end of the semesters is the mapping of “places of personal significance”, which has been defined by Nelson (2000) as places of personal, emotional importance, symbolic, civic, cultural, or historical importance or useful, well-frequented places. I will ask every student to construct two lists of ten places each (one for London/Paris and one for Urbana-Champaign), ranked according with importance, including a short explanation as to why they chose that particular place. This exercise will provide insight into the students’ integration into the host city and the variety of their activities, as compared to their home town.

Finally, I will apply a micro-demographic ethnographic analysis as defined by Duneier (1999: 369): mapping population distributions, looking for ways in which “demographic, cultural and political data can be complemented by studies of day-to-day life which show, rather than assume, how the system works.” Concretely, this means that, in addition to participant observations, interviews, focus groups, and mapping exercises, I will also investigate the histories of the specific study abroad programs in London and Paris by gathering data on the communication between the guest and host universities, on major developments in the design of the programs, on housing options and host families, and on guidance and activities organized at the host university. These data will be extremely important in order to understand the larger framework in the host countries in which the students are received.

**Ethics**

The most important basis of this project will be the cooperation of the students, i.e. their willingness to tolerate me as a continuous observer and to participate in several rounds of interviews and focus groups with their families. Although the benefits for them will be minimal, I don’t expect problems in recruiting participants. During the pilot study, I found that many students were available for interviews to talk about their experiences. Although this project will certainly be more intrusive, I expect a similar positive attitude. The names of individuals will be replaced by pseudo names, and information provided will be treated with much caution as to avoid revealing identities. I will allow the interviewees to view and respond to my analyses and I will be respectful of any complaints or suggestions.
As I have a Dutch nationality, as I am very familiar with British, French, and American cultures, and as I have spent considerable amount of time abroad for work and study, I expect that the students will find it easy to confide in me. However, I have to be careful to avoid that I lose my objectivity. Although I have the responsibility to help the students with serious problems wherever I can, my presence should not make their time abroad significantly different. Thus, I should limit my activities to participant observation as much as possible and use individual interviews and focus groups not too frequently during the semester. It is not unlikely that such sessions would contribute to the way the students process their experiences and thus might influence the results.

**Significance**

The proposed study will enhance the understanding of the dynamics and processes through which American students that spent a semester abroad become more sensitive to other cultures. This is relevant not only for study abroad programs, their evaluations, and possible improvements, but also with regard to persistent stereotypes of Americans in other countries and the representative role of the students going abroad.

**References**

**Balshem, M. (1991).** Cancer in the Community: Class and Medical Authority. Smithsonian Institution Press.


