

## Transformative Power of Travel: Short Term Study Abroad for High School Students

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### Abstract

Much of current educational research and instruction is focused on standardization. Test scores have become the dominant currency for measured success. In this paper I argue that as educators we must stop fact based instruction directed at building good test takers. Our responsibility, especially in the Humanities, is to help students to become moral and productive citizens. To this point, this article discusses exploratory learning through short-term student travel. There is a great need for educators within the Humanities to critically debate what it is we want of and for our students; this article is a small part of that debate. It is my central argument that the experiences students have outside of the classroom have a more powerful and lasting impact on their educational, social, and moral development.

**Keywords:** study abroad, student travel, pluralism, experiential learning

*“Not only do schools usually fail to orient instruction toward students’ personal contexts, the learning orientation is ordinarily divorced from reality. Instead, students are expected to manipulate symbolic information and apply it in ways that are detached from the real world.”<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. A day in the life of Every-Student:

#### First Period: Geometry

Every-Student is learning the basic concepts and importance of the direct proof. She is instructed that her conclusions are only valid if established by combining axioms in a logical way while also using theorems previously studied. First-order logic is the order of the day in class. Every-Student leaves after forty-five minutes, proud of her ability to illustrate the existence of previously proven things.

#### Second Period: English Literature

Every-Student has been given the role of Portia in the class’ reading of *Julius Caesar*. Every-Student struggles with some of the hypocritical ideas of what is and is not moral with regards to the actions of her character? How can concealing plans of murder and an attempted coup be moral? If murder is wrong for Caesar, does it not follow that it is wrong for Brutus? Is Portia guilty of murder as well due to silence? She reads her lines in a monotone, uninterested voice, eyeing the clock.

#### Third Period: Physical Education

After changing into her athletic gear, Every-Student stands in line waiting for attendance to be called. Students are then informed as to the importance of properly stretching their muscles so they avoid injury. They are given a brief demonstration, then run a few warm-up laps before stretching themselves. Following the stretch, the period is almost at an end, so the students are sent back into the locker room to change in time to go to their next class.

#### Fourth Period: World History

The topic of the day: Ancient Greek Philosophy. Every-Student is fascinated with the ideas of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, especially his ideas on how to live the “good-life” as well as his contribution to classical logic, namely the idea that something cannot both be, and not be, at the same time. Just before the end of the period, her teacher mentions someone named Euclid as being influenced by Aristotle... but Every-Student had never heard of this person before and so was somewhat uninterested.

#### Fifth Period: Spanish

It’s a quiz day in Spanish class for Every-Student. Today’s quiz consists of a group of food related nouns and a collection of verbs, some of which are related to eating.... Others deal with conversation, travel, and school.

#### Sixth Period: Chemistry

Every-Student is learning about the importance of empirical evidence through reason, observation and analysis. There are some names which come up that seem somewhat familiar, but she can’t seem to place them...

<sup>1</sup> Clifford H. Edwards, *Educational Change: From Traditional Education to Learning Communities*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2011), 9.

Descartes, Newton, Aristotle, Euclid...

As you can imagine, the next day for Every-Student was much of the same. And while Every-Student's teachers may be passionate, devoted, and excellent educators, the structure of the system in which they teach prohibits the type of educational experience that we, as professionals, know is better for our students. (Ross, 58-60). Think of the potential for true interdisciplinary instruction which exists in Every-Student's schedule. Yet each subject is taught in a vacuum, with no direct relationship to each other and no attempt at real-world application or individualized conceptualization for students. In my own experience as a high school social studies teacher, my students, though teamed, often have no contextual connections between disciplines. The story of Every-Student above is not simply anecdotal or euphemistic, but rather it displays a very real scenario which plays out in schools across the country.

The objective observer can clearly see potential connections between the delivered content. Euclidean Geometry being taught without real discussion of Euclid or his influences (namely Socrates) or their relation to Aristotle. Aristotle's ideas of morality and inherent goodness may have helped Every-Student to better understand the personalities being studied in *Julius Caesar*. Her World History class may have provided a bit of insight, but it was without context and connection to her earlier studies. The same was true later in Chemistry when she began to look at the Scientific Method. How can any discussion of reason and logic not include the Greeks? We cannot forget Physical Education or Spanish, which were simply thrown into the mix without even a cursory attempt to connect them to the larger educational narrative being played out during Every-Student's day.

## 2. How Do We Measure Success?

How can educators best reach students? I suppose it depends on what is meant by "reach." Do we simply want students to be able to complete the proof? Identify symbolism in Shakespeare? Memorize dates? Know what a *manzana* is? Know what AU is on the periodic table? Why... what's the point? Students wonder this too... what is the point? As a student and scholar of the humanities, I refuse to accept that the purpose of education is simply to know things and memorize facts. We must have a larger goal in mind; that of fostering a sense of care for ourselves and others, to help students develop feelings of empathy, and to better prepare them to face the moral and economic challenges of post-secondary educational life – whether that life be college, the military, or the work force. Teachers of every discipline need to connect with students by providing a sense of purpose to their studies. Basically it is incumbent on the educator to make students understand that what we are teaching is worth learning!

Consider the following question: When you think back to your best, most effective teachers (regardless of grade level) what words or attributes come to mind? I posted this question to my Facebook page in the hopes of getting honest responses from those outside the many connected fields of education. The most common responses were: *caring, honest, patient, kind, understanding, invested, inspiring, and empathetic* (Xiarhos: Facebook Post. Jan 30, 2017). How do these responses compare to your own? Now consider the types of things missing from the list: content driven, great test prep, standard based instruction. In fact of the 53 responses I received at the time of this writing, not one included anything strictly related to content, test scores, or standards. It would appear students remember the character and devotion of the person rather than the strict content taught by that person. This is something missing in our current national dialogue on educational best practices and it is almost completely non-existent in formal teacher preparation programs.

In his recent work, *The Formative Five*, Thomas Hoerr argues that there really is only one measure of an individual teacher's or an entire school's success; and it has nothing to do with test scores, graduation rates, attendance, or percentages of students being accepted to top institutions. Rather it is simply whether or not former students lead happy and productive lives at, "age 25, 45, and 65" (2). Hoerr claims that it is the how a former student lives his life that defines success for academic institutions. Are these former students moral people? Are they good friends? Are they inspired by life? Do they seek to inspire others? Are they honest? Are they loving? Are they empathetic? If, as a society, we value these traits, or if potential employers value them, then we as educators must model them. We must seek to inspire our students to be the best versions of themselves, and in order to achieve this we must find new and innovative ways to reach and connect with them, ways in which Every-Student's teachers seemingly fail to do. During a leadership conference hosted by the world-wide student educational tour company EF Tours, key note speaker Ken Robinson told high school students that every student has an assortment of talents, talents which traditional education often fails to identify or exploit.<sup>1</sup> If this is true, then we must provide the opportunity for students to think differently about the world around them and ultimately allow them to think differently about themselves" (Robinson).

Granted, the things for which I am arguing, namely a stronger devotion to a more humanistic approach to education, are difficult to quantify. There is not a national standardized test or strict information collection

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<sup>1</sup> EF = Education First.

process which can provide scientific or numerical data relating to a teacher's capacity for care, empathy, or inspiration. And no summative assessment will be able to measure a student's direct increased content knowledge in relation to humanistic teaching in comparison with strict content driven instruction. So what? For the past eleven years, I have developed a travel-based extracurricular program in which I lead students on informal study tours. These tours and experiences include things as simple as local, authentic ethnic restaurants or day trips to New York City or Boston, and they also include more in depth tours to European destinations, Asia, and Latin America. It is through these experiences that my students truly learn. They learn in a way and to such depth that it is impossible, even for the most talented and dedicated teacher, to replicate within the confines of the traditional classroom setting.

### 3. The Holocaust: Two Modes of Instruction

During the summer of 2014 I led a group of sixteen students ranging from high school sophomores to high school seniors on a twelve day study tour of Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. The trip's main focus was Holocaust Studies. All of the students, to varying degrees, had studied the European Theater of World War II in general and the rise of Hitler and the Nazis as well as the Holocaust specifically. These students were well versed in what the Nazis did during their twelve year rule of Germany; they could quote the number of victims from various countries, the results of the conflict, the issues with the refugee population which resulted from the War and its relation to the creation of the modern state of Israel... they knew all of these things, but they had never really felt them.

The first few days of our trip were centered in Berlin. I, along with a colleague, brought students to Bebelplatz, the site of the infamous 1933 book burning. We stood on the direct spot where Nazis burned works written by the likes of Remarque, Einstein, Heine, and Kastner (among many others).<sup>1</sup> As we gazed down into Micha Ullman's solitary memorial of empty book shelves under the surface of Bebelplatz, we could not help but be struck by the poetic irony of looking down at the ghost shelves below to gazing at Humboldt University just across the street – a location where the free exchange of ideas is once again thriving. A few days later we had made our way into Poland and were set to visit the most infamous camp in the Nazi Concentration Camp system; Auschwitz.

In preparation for this visit, my colleague and I attempted to prepare students for the possible emotions they would feel as they walked through the *Arbeit Mach Frei* iron gates which stood at the entrance of each Nazi camp.<sup>2</sup> We did our best to help them understand that "being-there" and being present at the location where one million people's lives were extinguished would be like nothing else they had experienced. These students knew the history of what happened here. We studied photographs and maps of the camp. We had read memoirs and watched interviews of survivors. We read about Nazi guards who claimed to be "just following orders." We read about Jewish doctors forced to experiment on other Jews in order to save the lives of their families. No new information was going to be given to them at the camp. But they would be at the camp.

While touring one of the buildings once used to interview and process newly arrived inmates of the camp, one of my students, a senior named Maggie Harrington<sup>3</sup> (the President of the my Travel Club organization) asked to be excused from the tour and step outside and away from the group. When I caught up to her, she was sitting on the stairs of an adjacent building, in tears. "I didn't really expect that." At that point we sat in silence together and waited for the group to finish the tour. That evening, as a group, we watched Germany defeat Argentina in the World Cup finals – a necessary distraction and escape from the emotional exhaustion of the day's events. Almost three years later I had the opportunity to discuss that tour with Maggie. I asked her only one question regarding her visit to Auschwitz, "What did you learn that day?"

*Auschwitz was an eye opening experience. It became one of those things that was no longer just a chapter in a textbook, but a reality check into the world we actually live in. A world that can produce such hate and such horror. The experience changed my outlook on how we remember and study the Holocaust. I literally stood where this genocide occurred and I could not shake the eeriness of that feeling. Even now I am anxious just thinking about it. That entire tour was overwhelming and exhausting in every aspect, but it was one of the most involved, engaging, and fully awakening experiences that I could ever imagine having. That tour and that day changed my life (Harrington).*

During my interview with Maggie, now a sophomore at Emmanuel College in Boston, I also asked her to take a traditional assessment regarding the Holocaust. The test was taken from material covered in Jackson J. Spielvogel's *Western Civilization*, a common textbook for upper level European History high school students (850-871). Having not covered the material for some time, Maggie did not perform well on the test scoring a 38%... well below any measure of standardized proficiency as determined by local or national standards. Had Maggie taken that same assessment directly after learning the material from class lectures and readings, her

<sup>1</sup> Erich Kastner was actually present at the scene during the book burning.

<sup>2</sup> Work Will Set You Free.

<sup>3</sup> The student's name has been changed per her request.

performance and her score would have been much stronger. She essentially forgot the material. Maggie did not forget the emotions of Auschwitz, the enormity of the event, and the recognition of what man is willing to do to his fellow man. I would argue that this feeling and realization is far more vital to ensuring such events are not part of our future than her remembering specific dates or statistics. Maggie learned about the Holocaust twice in her high school career; once in the classroom and once at Auschwitz. I ask you to consider which experience will prove to be lasting, which she use in her life - regardless of major in college or her choice of career? Where did true learning take place?

The experience Maggie had at Auschwitz was, in her own words, transformative (Harrington). That word, “transformative” is crucial to the potential power of student travel. What can be deemed transformative? Clearly it is much more than having a good time or learning something. Gauging transformation is another very difficult idea to quantify, but we can begin to do so by answering some very simple questions:

1. Was the experience immersive? (Did the student fully engage the experience in such a way as to leave normal, every-day life behind?)
2. Did the experience cause a drastic shift in the student’s thinking or perspective on a particular issue or topic?
3. Can the student say that they are, in a very literal sense, a different person following the travel experience?

If the answers to these questions are yes, then it is very likely that the student went through a truly transformative experience.

#### **4. The Transformative Power of Travel**

The potential for transformation is the point here, not that each and every student will reexamine their lives, but just that the opportunity exists for some to do so. It is also important to recognize that the transformation of the individual may be a much more internal change than anything which can be seen by the passive observer. These experiences may dramatically alter the student’s outlook and create the potential for new responses to events or situations, but it does not necessarily mean that upon their return other people will immediately see this change (Kottler, 25). The story of another student, Ariana illustrates this point.

In 2011 Ariana joined eleven of her classmates on a eleven day tour of Costa Rica. The trip included service learning activities at local elementary schools, conservation activities in the rainforest, and some activities for adrenaline junkies like whitewater rafting, Tarzan swings, and ziplining. Ariana’s experience, though very different from what Maggie went through, was no less transformative. Ariana was a student who struggled with almost crippling anxiety. She had always wanted to see the world, but the thought of leaving home and all that was “known” caused her to panic and regress into a world of normalcy and familiarity. The study tour to Costa Rica offered her a chance to engage in the new while also having a safety net of the familiar. As the class advisor for the Class of 2012, I had a strong relationship with Ariana and she was relatively comfortable with me. It also helped a few of her very close friends were also going on the trip. Two years after our trip, I asked Ariana the same one question; what did you learn?

*“My trip to Costa Rica was without a doubt the most amazing experience I have had thus far in my life. I learned so much about a culture that I would have never learned by sitting in a classroom. Before leaving for Costa Rica, the only word I knew in Spanish was ‘Hola’. After spending some time around natives who only spoke Spanish, I picked up a lot more and became somewhat conversational. I was also able to try out some crazy activities like free falling 208 feet off a rickety bridge in the middle of a forest and hanging out on a beautiful beach a few feet away from wild monkeys. Being in a country like Costa Rica allowed me to open my eyes to the wonders of the world, not just the beauty of the land, but the beauty and potential of each and every person. This past February marks two years since I finally broke free of the anxiety that held me back from seeing the world. In May I leave for a three-week excursion to Iceland, and next December I embark on the biggest adventure of my life. I will be breaking free of my life here in America and living on my own in London for six months” (Greco).*

Ariana’s Costa Rican experience was about much more than learning new phrases in Spanish or planting a tree in the rainforest (though these are fantastic experiences in and of themselves). Her experience was about healing and finding peace with her own fears and moving towards what she really wanted out of life. Susan Ross may have best expressed this idea with the following, “Travel has the potential to be a viable and intentional therapeutic approach to personal growth and healing” (59).

#### **5. Conclusion**

Finally, it is worth considering not simply what is gained through travel, but also what is potentially lost if such opportunities are not made available to high school students. Ross argues that travel is a rite of passage, something necessary in order to move from the childhood perception of the world revolving around the individual to a more mature, accurate understanding of the larger world and the complete human experience

rather than simply the educational or school experience (59). In the *Art of Travel*, Alain de Botton warns against a life filled with the idea that happiness should be drawn only from materiality and the preconceived, untested perceptions (25). In supporting, or better still, fully endorsing student travel, we acknowledge that a life lived “on the road” (in at least the metaphorical sense) creates potential to develop a world view which allows for the celebration of the familiar and the embrace of the other; perhaps even a complete conceptual elimination of the “other.” Through a consistent devotion to the student travel experience, I continue to offer this type of learning environment to my students. Following the 2014 study tour, I brought students to Spain in 2015; Italy, France, and Germany in 2016; and Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic in 2017. My research into this form of education continues in 2018 in Italy with twenty-four students, and in 2019 as we tour the Normandy region of France.

I will close with the words of one final student’s response to what she learned while traveling abroad, ***“I admit at least one of the places I’ve traveled to started out as a way of collecting another stamp on my passport, but it ended up motivating me further to achieve global citizenship in the harbor of those passport page creases because travel never ceases to amaze me. None of what I’ve learned from traveling could have been taught to me or learned within the confined and constricting walls of a classroom. This wasn’t some sort of vacation, but rather a vacating of my life in the northern border. Most importantly what I’ve learned is that if you don’t know where you’re going, you can never be lost and if you do ever find yourself “lost” it’s really just an adventure. I used to think that I was a traveler and not a tourist, but now I’ve realized that I’m an explorer carrying out the act of carefully executed participant observation in the name of photography and anthropology” (Lerner).***

Or we can ensure that students know the Presidents of the United States in chronological order.

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