

In Pursuit of Butterflies: Considering Methods for Breaking Open our Students' "Digital Cocoons" While Abroad

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In their essay entitled "Digital Cocoons and the Raw Abroad," which was published in *Inside Higher Ed*, George Greenia and Jacob H. Rooksby (2016) call for a "digital detox" amongst U.S. millennials who study abroad. They aver, "Touch and taste, leisure and loneliness, fatigue and friendship—each is lived in the flesh, not in pixels" (p. 2). At the same time, they pose a provocative question which is as much a paradox as it is a dilemma for study abroad participants: *Can a digital native ever go native?* In other words, is it possible for "digital natives"—the young kids who have grown up in this post-millennial age of digital technology—to disconnect from their devices and absorb an analog experience abroad as their pre-millennial parents, grandparents, and ancestors once did?

Like Greenia and Rooksby (2016), thinking back to my own experience studying abroad in Siena, Italy in the spring of 2002, I remember making occasional visits to Internet cafes, purchasing international phone cards to call home, and writing a lot of postcards and letters. I regularly journaled, wrote poetry in English and Italian, and immersed myself in the works of literary giants like Pirandello and Calvino. Each night I sat down to a minimum of a two-hour lively dinner with my host mother and roommates. Those were the waning days of what Greenia and Rooksby (2016) call the "raw abroad" before smartphones and Facebook arrived and we all got wrapped up in our own electronic chrysalises.

These days liberating students from their digital cocoons so they can spread their wings and grow through actively engaging with a foreign culture is a daunting task for international educators. Not only is our society beleaguered by the internet in the form of social media and a gazillion new apps, but often the addiction only worsens when students go abroad and take solace in their smartphones and laptops to weather

homesickness and culture shock. There is also the "party abroad" culture of students for which the well-meaning liberator is contrarily perceived as a cruel oppressor, vindictively photo-bombing their entire awesome experience.

While international educators certainly cannot reverse this evolution, we can find and introduce engaging, yet non-electronic, means for students to spend less time in those cocoons with the hope of accelerating their metamorphosis. Brooke Roberts and Natalie Garrett (2016) created what they call in their conference presentation, "a reflective learning practice students will actually want to do." As part of the reflective process, *The Study Abroad Journal* incorporates goal setting and tracking in four areas: academic engagement, cultural exploration, career development, and "wild card." Having completed the journal, students return home with a mature understanding of the various ways their sojourn has impacted them and how they can market that experience toward a future career. Importantly, the very act of old-fashioned journaling with pen and paper, an increasingly primitive notion in this era of blogging and posting on social media sites, forces students to come to terms with their experience abroad without the ubiquitous means of virtual escape at their fingertips. They are challenged to look around and then inward to derive meaning from their inscrutable surroundings rather than take blithe refuge in their Facebook News Feed.

A similar method is to develop program curricula which encourage creativity, self-expression, and reflection without the use of electronic media. Thinking back to my architecture course in Siena, it seemed like almost every weekend we were thrust into a frenetic, marathon march from one basilica to the next. It was as if our goal was to go one by one checking off all the churches on our exhaustive list like rampaging tourists.

As a result, the vast majority of those remarkable structures and their histories were rendered quotidian, thereby blurring into instant anonymity before us. If for each trip, however, we had chosen just one basilica and spent the day exploring it inside and out and then trying to capture it thoughtfully in writing or a sketch, those vestiges of antiquity might have achieved their due prominence in my own memory. Later in life, I might have been able to revisit an original free verse poem or landscape painting and discover new meaning from my contemplation of that erstwhile scene. Instead, where I once perfunctorily snapped photos on my crude Kodak camera, many of today's sojourners are just as blithely passing through Tuscany's duomos, only now armed with smartphones to collect Pokémon Go medals along the way.

One final approach to helping students break out of their digital cocoons and enjoy a more meaningful study abroad experience is to tap into valuable human resources. Michael Vande Berg and Michael Paige (2012) argue that cultural mentors in the form of educators can be instrumental in guiding students through activities which enable meaningful reflection and benefit their personal growth. Similarly, Thor Sawin and Peter Seilheimer (2016) advocate for the use of language allies—native speakers and guides to local culture who are not language teachers—and language coaches—experienced learners who are not necessarily speakers of the host country language. Through building these resources into education abroad programs and continually assessing their efficacy, we international educators can help students “go native” by supporting them to enjoy the truly transformative overseas experiences which have to happen offline.

As someone who is particularly interested in the International Student and Scholar Services side of the international education field, I also wonder if some of these approaches could be effective in helping international students break free from their digital cocoons. Although many of them study here in the US for greater lengths of time than our study abroad students and have different goals and ambitions, they, too, may need a special journal of their own and a

supportive university network in order to eventually become butterflies.

References

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