

## **Theoretical Perspectives on the Study Abroad Site as a Location of Cultural Intersection**

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I am honored and delighted to be able to speak here today because I would like to use this opportunity to pose some questions and generate some conversation on a topic that is sitting at the margins of conferences while aspects of it have a substantial effect on study abroad. I have been anticipating this conference because it brings together academics and field practitioners who teach, host, and facilitate student study abroad and those international education professionals who advise students.

For me this conference is an opportunity to begin to discuss the issues that arise in the space where students and hosts bring their expectations and merge their cultures. I would suggest that program design of study abroad programs delivered to US students studying in Latin America has a great deal to do with how hosts and students manage that intersection of cultures.

In framing my questions, I would like to use perspectives of certain academic disciplines not always regarded as resources in discussing study abroad. Intercultural Communications, for example, is a frequent resource for study abroad professionals in analyzing the intersection of two cultures. Instead, however, I would like to use the field of cultural studies to frame my presentation because it provides us with an interesting, fundamental and, I think, very applicable discussion of culture and of cultural production as a starting point. I'll be bringing forward a pertinent definition of culture later, but first let us look at the "fit" of bringing the Gramscian concept of the word "production" into the discussion. "Production," as borrowed from industry, serves to confront the fact that study abroad is market driven. In fact many of the more problematic aspects of study abroad programs relate to the consumer / producer relationship which is shared with tourism. Thus, an additional discipline that can inform the field of study abroad is the anthropology of tourism. As a discipline it is not reticent about looking at the effects of tourism as an industry while we in study abroad prefer to remain in the academic context as if we might lose legitimacy by acknowledging the market aspects of our work.

If we allow ourselves to let the concepts of the academic and social ideals of study abroad coexist with the market driven realities, we have the opportunity to shift from the academic paradigm which looks

almost exclusively at measuring outcomes: language learning, transformational learning, intercultural competence, among many, and to shift from the tourism paradigm which looks at the market and how it can ravage or radically alter locations and populations. By establishing a space within the discipline of cultural studies we can look at culture and the hosts of study abroad who produce that culture and how aspects of that production and its consumption by students function in the lives of both stakeholder groups. And it is here that we as part of the third stakeholder group, the institutional stakeholders, will find some fertile ground for discussion that, I believe, will give us an additional perspective for analysis.

Now for a definition or two and a bit of a literature review to underpin this new paradigm:

Borrowing from the book *Transforming Modernity: Pop Culture in Mexico* by Nestor Garcia Canclini, a definition of culture is available which is suitable to this new perspective. Garcia Canclini formulated it based on his analysis of the influence of tourism on the Mexican market place. It is grounded in the theoretical analysis of culture as a product and those who generate culture as its producers. Culture is defined as “the production of phenomena that contribute, through symbolic representation or re-elaboration of material structures, to the understanding, reproduction, transformation of the social system, in other words, all practices and institutions involved in the administration, renewal and restructuring of meaning.”<sup>1</sup>

That definition suits study abroad education theory beautifully because it ceases to deal with culture as “high/low” “formal/informal” while still allowing for useful categories to establish themselves and give identity and locus differentiation to the architectural ruins of Greece, on the one hand, and the production of ouzo, on the other, or to the murals of Orozco and the making of mole. It is a definition that allows for academia to move beyond judging or controlling the content of a program as “high - classical” or “low-popular,” while holding to a high standard the learning, critical reflection, and analysis by students of program content.

With a definition of culture that spans “all practices and institutions involved in the administration, renewal and restructuring of meaning,” I want to pose my first question: In what ways do hosts see themselves as cultural producers?

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<sup>1</sup> Canclini, Nestor Garcia. *Transforming Modernity: Pop Culture in Mexico*. Austin: U. Texas, 1993 p. 10.

In recounting the self-described role of hosts I would like to present the thinking of various individuals from a host community in a neighborhood of Managua where I did a research project on the impact of long term hosting of study abroad in their neighborhood.

Let us take the words of a home stay coordinator in Managua as an example of the hosts' depth of understanding of why students come to Managua to study. She understands the purpose of the study abroad student presence in her community as this:

"... they (the students) are interested in development (of Nicaragua), culture, economy, statistics and everything that has to do with the well-being of the people. I believe that for us it is important that when the students return to their country they carry a vision of the reality of what is lived here."<sup>2</sup>

As here a host describes the role of cultural producer played by the home stay community:

"Personally I like the program so that I share everything, both material things and feelings with the young people (students). We teach them our customs and we learn from them their ways of living."<sup>3</sup>

So as study abroad professionals who acknowledge the host role in the development of language and intercultural competence in students, do we also acknowledge the professionalism of hosts as cultural producers whether they are lecturing professors, indigenous artisans, family members, practicing shamans or practicing public health researchers?

After hear host community members' concerns and perspective I had the impression that they valued the study abroad program less as an income producer than as employment that offered a sense of professionalism in their work as hosts and as a venue for production of their reality, their identity, the production of their culture. I included in a survey the question:

In your opinion, what is more important to the host collaborators?

The answers in order of importance, highest to lowest, were:

The recognition of the host as a specialist or professional in the intercultural development of foreigners
The opportunity to share the Nicaraguan culture with a foreign student
The friendship of a foreign student
The economic help
The Christmas basket as a sign of appreciation

<sup>2</sup> Levy, Julie. Host Culture Perception of a Study Abroad Program and Its Impact on the Community. SIT Capstone Research: May, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Same.

If hosts are considering themselves cultural producers and wish to continue to professionalize their role, as is the case in several communities with whom I have spoken, the next question I would pose is: Do we as study abroad collaborators need to problematize the commoditization of culture on our programs?

The anthropology of tourism gives much publication space to this discussion framed in the debate about what effect tourism has on local ritual traditions. Expressed in this statement by Davydd Greenwood is the perspective of the anthropologist raging against the devaluation of culture by its commoditization:

“Treating culture as a natural resource or a commodity over which tourists have rights is not simply perverse, it is a violation of the people’s cultural rights. The commoditization process does not stop with land, labor, and capital but ultimately reaches history, ethnic identity, and culture of the peoples of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Referring back to the market paradigm, I believe that it is fundamental in program design and delivery to address concerns of commoditization. WE will want to look for answers from the hosts themselves, program directors, and models of program planning and implementation that lead beyond host involvement to host centrality.

A study abroad academic director recently quoting the book The Global Activists Manual: Local Ways to Change the World by Mike Prokosch and Laura Raymond, study abroad alumni wrote, “The sooner we meet our partners, the sooner we will learn how much we need their clarity and determination.”<sup>5</sup>

The urgency of “meeting our partners” leads to a third question:

How do host centrality and evolving program partnerships reframe the space in which students and host cultures intersect?

As a basis for inquiry we have yet another discipline to frame the discussion of authorship. Arturo Escobar writes in *Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World*<sup>6</sup> about the dominance of the North American/ European development model and how the discourse this model generated

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<sup>4</sup> Greenwood, Davydd. "Culture by the Pound: An Anthropological Perspective on Tourism as Cultural Commoditization" Host and Guests, The Anthropology of Tourism, Second Edition. Valene L. Smith, ed., U. of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1989 p.181.

<sup>5</sup> Prokosch, Mike and Laura Raymond. The Global Activists Manual: Local Ways to Change the World. Thunder's Mouth Press / Nation Books: April 2002

<sup>6</sup> Escobar, Arturo 1995. Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

has assumed the power to define who is less developed and what are their needs. This recognition of the power of definitions and authorship of discourse needs to be reflected in study abroad program development. Certainly study abroad has taken on some of that discourse not only in its academics, but also in its assumptions of proprietary program construction. Some programs are established without host knowledge or partnership and without assessment of “cultural carrying capacity.” Study abroad, like tourism, seeks the unusual, the spectacular, the fragile, the most meaning-laden parts of the environment and culture of the host. However, tourism rarely claims a high level of academic interpretation of its subject or destination. Study abroad, on the other hand, may interpret, translate, and define its hosts and destinations as it chooses, in the name of academics. How often are programs analyzed for host centrality in interpretation and perspective? What is the origin of the discourse that surrounds the academic analysis of a host culture? In whose language and from whose assumptions are programs designed and taught? The questions raised by the deconstruction of “development” certainly might raise awareness in the field of study abroad as to how to design programs that present themselves by the host definitions of culture and society and its analysis of itself and its relation to its guests.

If host centrality is fundamental in the framing of discourse on a program, are there examples in existing programs in the field?

From Academic Director William Calhoun of Fortaleza, Brazil, comes a description of one model of placing hosts at the center of program planning and delivery: “We are engaged in a process of dialog and reflection with host nationals regarding the complete integration of our program around the themes of social justice. In this regard we have planned (hopefully there will be funding) a three-day retreat at the beginning of the fall semester that will include participants from all components of the program. The objective of the retreat is to ensure the understanding of the program team of the fundamental importance of what we do, how we do it, and how all of what we do must be linked toward a common end. We hope to allow the opportunity for all to discuss concerns, problems, and strategies for integrating their areas around the theme of social justice. Each area must know and understand the objectives and goals of all other areas as well knowing what content composes each area to ensure there is integration. We expect that this integration will assist in helping team members to get to know one another better, understand the

importance of their work together, more comprehensively integrate students into the goals and objectives of the semester as well as present a unified and theoretically coherent structure to student participants.”<sup>7</sup>

The long-term presence of this program and its director are of particular interest to me because it is a highly evolved program model. The director gave this stunning analysis of his years of work creating this semester-long study abroad program on the theme of social justice:

“We are finally beginning to understand the depth and the breath of our work as educators in an international cross-cultural environment. We are finally beginning to understand the moral, social, cultural and educational implications of being present in Brazil and how this impacts our host culture, our students and ourselves. We are finally beginning to understand our responsibility before (the study abroad organization), our students, Brazil and the world community. We know that we are not engaged in an ordinary ‘study abroad’ exercise. We know that we are not merely filling in a semester of a student’s undergraduate educational program. We know that the implications and consequences of our university program are not the same as those of the student’s home institution. We know that our missions are different, our goals are different and our results are different. We know that the level of participation and dedication of host nationals goes far beyond the token receipt of honorariums. We know that what we do is not an inconsequential undertaking.

We are convinced that there is not a nobler task we could be involved in at this moment in our history. The need is for education that leads to change in our perspectives and our relationships on all levels. The need is for education that brings north and south and south and south together in mutually respectful environments for dialog, cooperation and the deconstruction and reconstruction of the ideas, concepts and theories that guide and orient our thinking and behavior in the world. In a word, education for life that eliminates the need for any and all forms of terrorism including poverty, exploitation, abandonment, corruption and greed.”<sup>8</sup>

This sense of vitality and optimism about partnership leads back to questions about the host perspective on the hybridized space created by programs. How much do we actually know about these spaces from asking

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<sup>7</sup> Calhoun, William. Study Abroad as a Process of Human Emancipation. Unpublished report not to be used without author’s permission.

<sup>8</sup> Calhoun, William. Study Abroad as a Process of Human Emancipation. Unpublished report not to be used without author’s permission.

hosts and students and from observing sites over time? From my very limited research in Nicaragua there were some clear results and some discontinuities. Hosts clearly valued the program as a venue for the production of culture. They told me, on the other hand, that there was no cultural impact from long term hosting. And that brings me to my final questions, which I will turn over to you for future discussion because I think that among us are perspectives developed from years of observation of that wonderful and dynamic space of cultural intersection between hosts, students, and ourselves. However, at least three children were named for students, and I got this answer from a former program assistant:

“Here in Maximo Jerez we have always had visitors, students, social workers, Peace Corps members, and for me, before it was a little mystical because they appeared different from us, more white, speaking a different language. And so, well clearly, it awoke in me the interest in knowing more. I wanted to know what they did here and how they lived and how they dressed, even including what they ate. And it was when I started to work with them, when I realized that they are absolutely normal people equal to us, that I became familiar with them and began to think that I was a student like them.”<sup>9</sup> (Former program assistant/social coordinator)

I would like to close by emphasizing the opportunity which we share collectively as a result of our access to study abroad sites in which there is an intersection of hosts and students that is unique to each site, yet occurs worldwide within fairly narrow parameters of engagement. The richness and utility of information about the hybridization at long term study abroad sites would be a contribution we might begin to make for the purpose of informing the discussion of program maintenance and development in the field of Study Abroad.

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<sup>9</sup> Levy, Julie. Host Culture Perception of a Study Abroad Program and Its Impact on the Community. SIT Capstone Research: May, 2002.