“The Best Decision I Ever Made”: Expectations and Realities of Studying Abroad in Europe

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Agenda

Introductions
Expectations v. Reality – what students report
Case Studies
How do we understand what is going on? Theory
Expectations

- Language fluency
- Global English
- Academic achievement
- Making lots of local friends

- Networking – finding business contacts for that internship or job
- Travel
- Fantastic host family
- Transformational experience
Reality

- Loneliness
- Boredom
- Fear
- Academic failure

- Frustration
- Feeling stupid
- Not blending in - being treated like a tourist
Reality

Trying to navigate the city; it took us two days to find xx, but once you get the hang of the different neighborhoods it is quite easy to navigate the city. It is also difficult to adjust to the projected American identity—before you speak Italians know you are an American. I can only describe it as “forever sitting at the kids table on Thanksgiving.” By that I mean, it’s quite hard to make the migration to the “adult table,” and integrate fully, a lot of times one feels like they belong (almost) and remain on the fringe of local life.
Reality

Student life, while in many ways similar, presented a major challenge for me, as the German approach to university education is in many ways different from the US American approach, especially that of K. The lack of a defined campus was perhaps the hardest adjustment I had to make.
Reality

The biggest challenge I faced in adjusting to my host country was the ability to be patient. Learning a different culture, a different language, a different frame of mind will always take time. Being patient with myself and situations surrounding being a foreigner was a really important lesson. You will feel foreign, and it's uncomfortable. But after a while, it's important to embrace that, to make that something you're proud of, rather than embarrassed or worried about. Once I finally said, "yes, I'm an American, I'm going to misunderstand things. I'm going to mispronounce words so that I accidentally say 'I'm dirty' instead of 'I'm alone''' it became so much more fun to make mistakes. I learned that integration doesn't equal blending in.
Before Taylor left for study abroad, she was primed by her father to make the experience „useful“ and establish meaningful business contacts for her professional future. Taylor is also looking forward to partying and traveling and having a great time with her two best friends, who are on the same program.

Upon arrival, she approaches the Resident Director about organizing an internship with one of the big German car companies, BMW and Audi, both about 2 hours away from her program city. Learning that she is not likely to get an internship at such short notice and that she had very little academic training as a third year student from a US university to be of interest to these companies does not dampen her spirits and she continues researching.

Since Taylor is interested 'in anything that is intercultural' and 'has to do with administration or economics,' the RD arranges for an internship with the city's Office for International Programs and City Partnerships. Taylor is given a schedule where she can participate and help out with two of the Offices bigger events, one being a very prolific three-day fundraiser.
One week into the program, Taylor falls ill and has to spend a night at the hospital. She is embarrassed about missing class and anxious about having to deal with the paperwork that relates to her hospital stay.

She also decides to travel with friends when the big fundraiser takes place at the Office for International Programs and City Partnerships, where she is supposed to help out. In conversation with the Resident Director and in her internship field notes, Taylor conveys the impression that she and her skills are not appreciated enough at the Office and that there is not enough work for her to do.
As the weeks progress, her plans for study abroad are not working out as they should have: she is not making meaningful business contacts; her internship is boring; she was advised against taking an advanced economics class and is even now struggling with her introductory class in history; she is not living in the dorms of her choice, downtown, but at a 20 minute walk from the city center; and her best friend has abandoned her and their communal vision of having great fun in Germany.

After the Christmas break, Taylor experiences an emotional low. By now, she is seriously concerned about her performance in most of her classes. She feels she hasn’t improved her German. She is worried about her parents' reaction in case she does fail a class or return home with low grades; at the same time, she does not feel that she can talk to them about how challenged she is by the various tasks and experiences of studying abroad in a foreign culture.
What’s going on with Taylor?

• What were her expectations? Were they unreasonable? Why?

• What should be discussed during the next conversation with Taylor?

• Whose responsible for the disconnect between student expectations and reality?
Case Study 2

Hussein arrived in France one month ago. His grandparents emigrated from Pakistan to the US and he speaks Urdu in his family home in California. His French skills and serious approach set him apart from the other students in the group. You meet regularly with all students, and during your conversations with Hussein he says that everything is fine and he is enjoying his classes.

During the second month of the program, you receive a call from the landlord of the residence Hussein shares with other program students. Apparently Hussein has been sleeping in the common area instead of the bedroom he shares with another student. At your next conversation with Hussein, you ask him about this. He looks down very embarrassed, almost as if he is starting to cry, and you don’t feel comfortable pressing him further. You ask him to let you know if he feels uncomfortable.
While on a program sponsored excursion to Marseille, you are with the student group touring the city when you all notice graffiti and signs expressing outrage at Muslim immigrants and declaring they should leave France. You and the group walk by the signs with no one acknowledging what they say, at first. Then, the “jokester” in the group laughs and says “good thing they don’t know about your bomb making skills Hussein.” Some students laugh.

Hussein does not come to the group dinner in the evening. During the trip back the next day he is quiet and giving mono-syllabic answers when asked a question. You decide he must be tired from the travel and let him be.
The following week you see Hussein at the café and ask him about his experience in Marseille. He doesn’t say much at first, but then he admits he felt uncomfortable when no one acknowledged that the graffiti in Marseille was anti-Muslim and when another participant even made a joke about all Muslims being terrorists. You counter that most French are not racists or anti-Muslim, but some may be concerned about the number of migrants coming into France and how this may impact everyday life.

You explain you cannot control the behavior of individuals or other students in the group, even if they are being rude. You tell him he should be speaking up for himself when events like this occur. Before the conversation ends, you remember to ask him about the housing situation, and make the case that by moving out of the bedroom, he missed an opportunity to assert himself.
What’s going on with Hussein?

• What’s going on with Hussein?

• What may be an explanation for this behavior?

• What should be discussed during the next conversation with Hussein?

• What’s the responsibility for the rest of the group?
What’s going on?

Expectations

Reality

Identity/social development

Questioning authenticity of experience
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<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achieving competence (intellectual, physical, manual) (1)</td>
<td>Student learns how to navigate city.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managing emotions (1)</td>
<td>Student recognizes emotions and appropriate expresses and controls them during conflict.</td>
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<td>Moving through autonomy to interdependence (1-2)</td>
<td>Student takes ownership of managing time, schedule, academic responsibilities.</td>
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<td>Developing mature interpersonal relationships (2)</td>
<td>Student establishes new peer group; recognizes differences; creates healthy relationships.</td>
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<td>Establishing Identity (2-3)</td>
<td>Student recognizes differences in identity development based on gender, sexuality, race, religion...</td>
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<td>Developing purpose (3-4)</td>
<td>Student develops career goals, commitment to activities</td>
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<td>Developing integrity (moving from individual moralized thinking to acceptance for the beliefs and values of others) (3-4)</td>
<td>Student develops strong sense of lifestyle and values; ability to integrate with others</td>
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Identity

- Thinking Styles
- Language
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Perspectives
- Experiences
- Nationality
- Job Level
- Race
- Culture
- Skills
- Gender
- Physical Abilities
- Sexual Orientation
- Age
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<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
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<td>Conformity</td>
<td>One identifies with white culture, learns and assumes stereotypes and has no way to identify or learn about their own racial or ethnic heritage.</td>
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<td>Dissonance</td>
<td>Encounter is the catalyst for one to question white culture and begin an interest in one’s own racial or ethnic group.</td>
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<td>Resistance and Immersion</td>
<td>Individual withdraws from white culture to delve into his or her own racial or ethnic exploration in the effort to define a new identity.</td>
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<td>Introspection</td>
<td>Individual actively seeks to integrate the redefined identity into the dominant culture without compromising aspects of his or her own racial or ethnic identity.</td>
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<td>Synergistic Articulation and Awareness</td>
<td>Optimum identity; Individual is able to identify as he or she wishes, appreciate other cultures including the dominant culture and balance all aspects of his or her heritage.</td>
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All imply the following for educators:

- Challenge and support
- Involvement
- Marginality and mattering
- Validation
Going beyond language and culture...

Recognizing the two sides of challenge and support

Balancing individual experience with the reality of working with many students on programs

Interventions, cultural mentors, and other structured reflection activities are not enough if student’s identity is not affirmed or even questioned
Case Studies: Revisited

Thinking about the theory, how would you approach your work with our two students?
Case Study 3

Denise has been in her semester study abroad program in Spain for six weeks. After the initial intensive language course, she is beginning to take courses at the local university with local professors. Denise and her family are from Mexico and have lived in the United States for many years and her Spanish language skills have helped her integrate socially. Denise appears engaged with the work, attending class, participating in the group activities, but after several weeks you (the Resident Director) run into one of her professors. The professor expresses frustration with Denise. She is not participating in class, and at some points has been a distraction to other students. She is constantly on her phone or laptop during the lecture, and has also interrupted other students and mocked their Spanish skills. The professor is frustrated, but not quite sure what to do.

You are surprised to hear this and decide to talk with Denise. You explain that she is not behaving in the way that is typical of students in a Spanish university. She must be mindful that now she is in Spain and has to adjust her behavior accordingly. During the entire conversation she seems distant and almost hostile. The conversation does not go well and both of you are very frustrated.
A few days later you run into Denise’s host mother. She tells you that Denise has been a delight to host and they have had really good conversations at the dinner table. The host mom tells you she is surprised Denise’s Spanish is so good, even though the host mom knows she doesn’t speak “real Spanish.”

The next day you run into Denise at the university cafeteria. She is with a group of Spanish students and seems to be enjoying lunch and having a good time, smiling and interacting with her peers. Later that same afternoon you happen to pass by the classroom where Denise is taking a class, and you observe her with headphones on and typing on her laptop, occasionally rolling her eyes. You decide it’s time to have another conversation with Denise.
• What’s going on with Denise? How is her behavior different in each of the different contexts?

• What may be an explanation for this behavior?

• What should be discussed during the next conversation with Denise?
For educators

Acknowledge role as mentor
Seek to understand students’ values and perspectives
Acknowledge differences and privileges
Check-in regularly
Advocate
Listen
Ask questions

Ferguson, K. It’s In the Relationship: Working with Students of Color. Presentation at Advising Workshop, Kalamazoo College, April 2015.
I am not a therapist or parent (!)

Relationships are important because it:

• builds trust with student
• affirms identity
• supports struggle

Ferguson, K. It’s In the Relationship: Working with Students of Color. Presentation at Advising Workshop, Kalamazoo College, April 2015.
Questions for guidance

Identify
Tell me about a challenge you have overcome, how did you do it?

Affirm
What are characteristics about you? How do these help you achieve your goals?

Envision
What would you consider a goal for your time here? How do you see yourself achieving this goal?
Questions

Plan

What obstacles could prevent you from achieving this goal?

Apply

When did you experience homesickness/loneliness/conflict in your life? What did you do in those situations that seemed to help?
Take aways

Relationships, not transactions;

Students will never have reasonable expectations – they are young and don’t know what they don’t know;

The challenges and support needs have changed for today’s student.
Discussion
References


Ferguson, K. It’s In the Relationship: Working with Students of Color. Presentation at Advising Workshop, Kalamazoo College, April 2015.


Schreiner, L. (n.d.). Questions for Strengths-Based Advising