

## Memory and Study Abroad: What Really Sticks?

Gene Kramer, Deborah Page, and Ruth Benander

*University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College*

Faculty, staff, and students agree that studying abroad is a transformative experience. The nature of that transformation has been a topic of intensive study by study abroad professionals. There is an extensive body of research documenting the affective and cognitive transformation students experience as a result of participating in study abroad programs, both short and long term. Immersion in another culture, the experience of novelty, and the realization of being “the other” is formative for students’ understandings of themselves. Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou (2012) explain, “One common view about studying abroad is that when students travel to and are “immersed” in a place different from home, they learn many interesting and useful things on their own, and do so rather effortlessly” (p. 3). The perception of automatic learning of “immersion” may inhibit program designers from actively designing for the full learning experience. In addition, the actual learning during of the “study” part of “study abroad” is even less clear. With educators using the rich contexts and the immersive environments available in study abroad to create learning experiences, it is important to consider what the students retain in the long term from the academic and overall experience.

Language skills and cultural competence have traditionally been key elements of the “study” part of “study abroad” (e.g. Isabelli- García, 2017; Pérez-Vidal & Sanz, 2014; Pyper & Slagter, 2015). Researchers agree that the effectiveness of improving language skills through

study abroad is complicated by psychological, social, cultural, and physical variables. In addition to language-oriented programs, there are many study abroad programs in which language acquisition is not the focus. In these programs, the focus is on academic content, where often the course is designed to use the location to provide meaningful context for the academic content. This study, approved by the university Institutional Review Board, focused on how salient the academic content was for students in short term (2-4 weeks) study abroad programs. We wanted to investigate and describe how students recalled the “study” part of “study abroad” after the program ended in comparison to their recollection of their emotional and social experiences during the program. We intend this description to inform study abroad designers planning curricular and experiential content. This description of what students recall from their study abroad experiences, long after their travel, might help instructors create international experiences that can leverage the social and emotional impact of study abroad to make the academic content equally memorable.

## **Background**

### **Study Abroad is a Transformative Experience**

In his 2009 book, *The First Time Effect: The impact of study abroad on college student intellectual development*, McKeown explores why students return from their study abroad programs and describe it as transformative. McKeown (2009) writes, “...Something profound happens during that first international encounter” (p.6). Even in short-term study abroad programs, students experience intellectual growth. This “first time effect” can be related to students’ construction of their own identity as their sense of self-identity and social-identity is disrupted by interacting in a community that they may not completely understand. The “first time effect” is a result of the liminal experience of living on the edge, between their home culture

and the host culture. Beech (2011) discusses how the study abroad experience puts students into a liminal experience where they learn more about themselves through the ambiguity of their experiences. As young people learn more about themselves, they experience this learning as transformative.

Star-Glass (2016) asserts, “Students need to be sensitive to the disruptions and structural ambiguity of the liminal experience, and [the program needs] to support and guide students in the ‘reconstruction of identity (in which the sense of self is disrupted) in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the individual and their community” (p. 103). Here Star-Glass is suggesting that study abroad programs should explicitly address the transformative experience of study abroad, but study abroad programs more often focus on the content of the discipline. Nevertheless, with reference to what students perceived as most relevant in their study abroad, Cheng (2016) writes, “The greatest benefit students perceived was personal growth and intercultural development, most frequently citing broadening horizons, opportunity to travel, personal growth, and learning to be more independent” (p. 170). As Cheng notes, students have a strong perception and take away of the “abroad” part of their programs. In many cases the academic context or “study” part could recede or serve merely as an excuse to go abroad for a novel experience.

### **What does Academic Study Have to Do with Study Abroad?**

Universities, institutes for study abroad, and faculty who teach courses in study abroad programs believe that the academic content is a foundation of study abroad. Nevertheless, faculty and staff at home and abroad have long questioned whether coursework at study abroad sites is as academically rigorous as it ought to be (e.g. Vande Berg, 2009). Page and Benander (2018) conducted an informal survey of 125 study abroad professionals, and respondents

reported that they most clearly remembered the travel, social relationships, and learning about other cultures. None of these study abroad professionals nominated “academic study” as a clear memory of the experience.

Sutton and Rubin (2010) conducted an explicit study on whether students learned academic content better in study abroad courses or in domestic courses. They performed academic assessments of geography and global politics of students who studied abroad and those who did not. Student performance on the assessments was not significantly different for the groups. However, students who had studied abroad scored significantly higher on assessment of functional knowledge of cultural practices and intercultural accommodation than students who had not studied abroad. When Sutton and Rubin (2010) compared the same courses taught domestically and in a study abroad program, they found that students in the study abroad courses had better understanding of the cultural contexts of the course content. In contrast, students who learned the material in the domestic course demonstrated better knowledge of the “factual detail”. This study supports students do learn a lot in study abroad programs, but it might not be the academic content.

Similarly, the Institute for the International Education of Students recently featured an article titled, “5 Years after Study Abroad” in which they conducted an interview with a past program student. This student reports on the cultural immersion as a positive outsider experience and how the study abroad program gave her the confidence to be a more understanding clinician and better able to deal with challenges. This interview clearly highlights the recurring theme that students perceive the academic content of study abroad as secondary to the emotional and social learning that they experience in study abroad.

Savicki and Price (2015) write that the emotional experiences can actually help students learn more effectively. These researchers assert that students give a great deal of energy to thinking about their emotional experiences, writing, “The psychological issues content area showed the most distinctive responses, with intense processing while students were experiencing the stressors of their encounters during the sojourn in the host culture. Similarly, cultural expectations showed continued intense thought upon reentry, thus signaling the need for further processing of those issues” (p. 599). This suggests that programs should incorporate reflective writing to help students think more critically about how they are feeling, providing an anchor for academic content as well as the overall educational experience of study abroad program.

Study abroad designers can leverage these powerful experiences to promote the academic content, which may seem to pale in contrast. Starr-Glass (2016) suggests that the powerful emotional experience could become the academic content, possibly leading to an increased view of the importance of study abroad for undergraduate students. While this perspective may not fit the academic content requirements, it is reasonable to consider how the emotional experience can enhance the academic experience of study abroad.

Folding the academic content into the emotional experience for greater impact is discussed in the work of Ellinghaus, Sinks, Moore, Hetherington, and Atherton (2019) in which they discuss how teaching study abroad changed their teaching strategies. For example, Ellinghaus (in Ellinghaus et al, 2019) writes, “My discussions with students became less about telling them facts and informing them of the “right” perspective and more about exploring the significance of a shared experience” (p. 173). In this article, Spinks (Ellinghaus et al., 2019) also writes about how the academic content of her study tour was effectively part of the social experience of the study tour, “One striking memory is that nearly every meal was eaten as a

group, with conversations about German culture and history segueing into bigger discussions about history and about life” (p. 176). These researchers all comment on how the immediacy and social engagement of the study tour environment inspired them to replicate these experiences in their home university teaching.

To explore the question of what students take with them from a study abroad program, we surveyed past participants of our college’s study abroad programs. We know, as designers of the academic content of these programs, that the courses were rigorous college courses fully integrated with the locations in which they occur. We also know, as study abroad instructors, that the academic portion of the study abroad program may not have been the principal focus of many students. To discover students’ enduring perceptions of emotional, social, and academic experiences of study abroad, we surveyed students of past study abroad programs. The survey questions were designed to find out what students remembered best, what affected them most, and how they used what they learned from study abroad after the program was over.

## Participants

Participants in this study included 23 undergraduate students from across several colleges of a research university, from 2009 through 2018, as shown in Table 1. We did not ask for gender or age information in the confidential surveys.

**Table 1**

*Participant Distribution across Year of Participation and Country of Program, N=23*

<u>Year of Participation/Country</u>	<u>Number of respondents</u>
2009 (United Kingdom)	3
2013 (United Kingdom)	6
2016 (United Kingdom)	9
2017 (Costa Rica)	1
2018 (Costa Rica)	4

### *Method*

We sent both paper and electronic surveys to 57 participants of previous study abroad programs at our college (Appendix A). We offered students an incentive of a \$20 Amazon gift card for completing the survey. The response rate to the surveys sent out was 40%.

The survey included both multiple choice questions and open answer questions. We coded open answer questions for common themes (Coffrey & Atkinson, 1996). We created descriptive statistics for the multiple-choice questions.

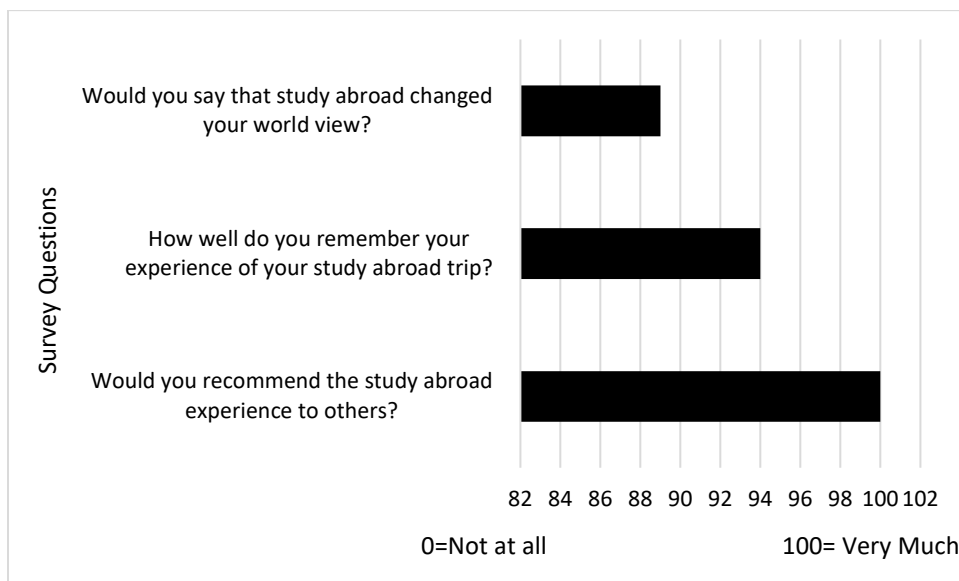
## Results

### Quantitative Data

The first multiple-choice questions we asked were students' general perceptions of their study abroad program. Students answered using a sliding scale from 0 to 100. Figure 1 shows student responses.

**Figure 1**

*Student perceptions of the importance of their experience*



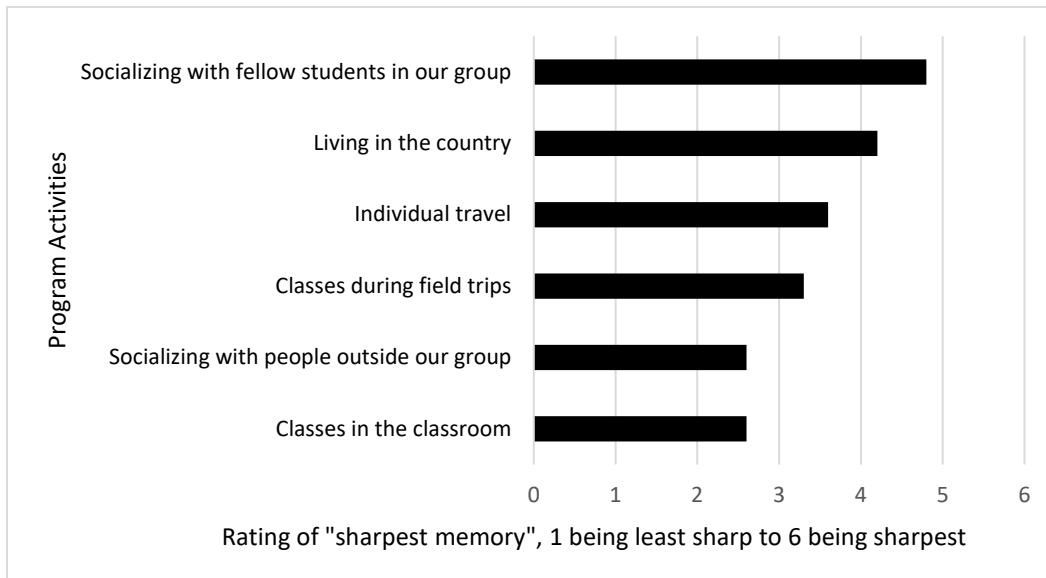
Students unanimously reported that they would recommend the experience. Ninety four percent reported that they clearly remembered their experiences from the trip regardless of how long ago their program took place. Many students strongly affirmed that study abroad changed their world view after the program was over, but some students did not perceive as great a change, yet the average response was still an 89% assertion that study abroad changed their world view.



We also asked students to rank categories of experiences on a scale of 1-6, least sharp memory (1) to most sharp memory (6) (see Figure 2).

## Figure 2

*When you think back on your study abroad experience, order the following options according to which is sharpest in your memory, with 1 being least and 6 being most*



Students reported socializing in the program group and living in the host country as their sharpest memories. It is interesting to note that classes in the classroom and socializing with people from outside the group were consistently ranked as the least memorable parts of the experience.

We then asked students, “Order these experiences according to which was most powerful for you emotionally,” with 1 being least and 4 being most. Figure 3 shows student responses to this ranking, with lower numbers representing stronger emotional importance and higher numbers representing less emotional importance.

### Figure 3

*Order of experiences according to which was most powerful for you emotionally, with 1 being least and 4 being the most*



Students reported that visiting travel locations and learning about different cultures consistently had a strong emotional impact for them. Students consistently rated academic study as having a low emotional impact for them.

### Qualitative Data

There were four open responses in the survey data, which we coded thematically. The first open response question asked, “What do you remember most vividly from your experience?” Table 2 presents the results of the thematic analysis.

**Table 2**

*What do you remember most vividly from your experience?*

---

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Number of times mentioned</u>
Sites	16
Relationships	8
Personal Growth	3
Cultural Differences	1

---

Students most frequently mentioned the locations they visited as their most vivid memory. The second most frequent memory involved the friendships they formed with their professors, host families, and other group members. For example, one student enthusiastically wrote,

The cities and towns we visited, places I most likely wouldn't have chosen on my own (mostly just out of not realizing what they had to offer), the freedom we had to explore, to get lost and find our way, and really immerse ourselves in the cities as much as we could, the thought provoking discussions we had as a group and that I personally had with our incredible professors, learning to navigate foreign cities, the places and museums, the drive to Harlaxton for the first time, the sandwiches we stuffed into our bags from the hostel in Vienna, ah, I could go on all day.

While the above student included personal interactions at the sites as a vivid memory, another student offered a representative memory specifically of relationships: "...but the experience of coming to know [the people in the program] so well in a short time is most vivid. There were confessions on nights out, debates between bunks, and chances to see other people as awestruck by the places as I was. I admired the commitment of professors and their willingness to bring us into their investigations."

The second question asked, "What did you learn about yourself [from this study abroad experience]?" Table 3 presents the results of the thematic analysis.

**Table 3**

*What did you learn about yourself?*

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Number of times mentioned</u>
<b>Confidence</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Cultural differences</b>	<b>6</b>
Travel	3
Learning to live more simply	2
Enjoyment of novelty and variety	2
Personal acceptance	2
Humility	1
Social growth	1
Caution	1

Students most frequently cited noticing cultural differences and incidents that helped them feel more confident. For example, in noticing cultural differences, one student wrote, “I found that my world had been small and that I’d been arrogant to think I knew a lot at 18. I hadn’t viewed institutions critically enough or given enough time to understanding other people’s passions or struggles.” Many students also talked about how participating in the program made them feel more confident. For example, one student wrote, “I learned that I like being lost. What I mean by this is that I love fully embracing a culture that isn’t my own and learning through experience. Going into this study abroad, I was not familiar with any of the languages that the countries we visited spoke. So when I walked around, I felt lost, but it was an exciting feeling, and it allowed me to really learn about where I was.”

The third question asked, “How did the study abroad experience change how you think or do things today, socially or at work?” Table 4 presents the thematic analysis.

**Table 4**

*How did the study abroad experience change how you think or do things today, socially or at work?*

---

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Number of times mentioned</u>
<b>Compassion</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Confidence</b>	<b>6</b>
Cultural awareness	4
Language capability	2
General communication skills	2
Awareness of surroundings	2
Taking advantage of opportunities	2

---

The most common themes in answering the question about what has changed for the student as a result of studying abroad concerned increased personal confidence and increased compassion for others. For example, one student wrote, “I feel much more confident reaching out to people who speak Spanish,” and another responded, “I better handle disruptions and changing plans and am more resourceful in new places.” Many students indicated how they have increased compassion for others. For example, one student wrote:

I have a new sincere respect for anyone trying to learn a second language via immersion, especially English. There wasn't a judgement barrier to begin with on my

side but living through it granted me an immense amount of patience and respect for immersive learners. I also had several lessons in hospitality and friendliness towards strangers. My host family was impeccably kind and giving and served as models for greeting strangers.

Another student observed, “I tend to be more open minded when meeting new people or when moving into a new group of people whether at a job or general experience.”

The final open-ended question in the survey asked, “What did you specifically learn in the course or courses in the Study Abroad program you took that you still use today?” Table 5 presents the thematic analysis.

**Table 5**

*What did you specifically learn in the course or courses in the Study Abroad program that you still use today?*

---

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Number of times mentioned</u>
<b>Historical analysis</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Literary themes</b>	<b>5</b>
Architectural analysis	4
Language Skills	3
Cultural awareness	3
Political analysis	2
Social history	1

---

In response to the question about the academic course content, students most frequently cited an awareness of historical analysis and recognizing the occurrence of literary themes. Of the five students who studied in language specific programs, three cited language skills. Students most often cited using historical analysis after their student abroad experience. For example, one student wrote about how she specifically uses the study abroad course content in her current employment, “I use historical analysis in literature in my middle school classrooms. It is highly popular in my American Poets unit.” Another student cites the course content from the History of Empire course as a way to understand politics more generally:

I felt that the psychological (Freudian) lens through which we viewed Austrian history/sociology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was thought-provoking course material. While I don’t apply it directly in my professional life it still provides a valuable perspective when studying historic, or even modern, geopolitical trends.

Students also mentioned that the literary themes from their literature course affect how they think about their current work. For example, reflecting on excursions to medieval cathedrals in the context of readings, a student from the Gothic Literature course responds to the prompt:

Well I think the words “verticality,” “flying buttress,” and “uncanny” will forever be imprinted on my brain but truly it helped to shape how I view the world. Whether it’s a piece of art, architecture or an entire city, I have a much more critical eye than I ever did before that trip. It’s changed how I see beautiful things, grotesque things, things that are supposed to be beautiful... to this day I sometimes find myself categorizing photos that I take and I so appreciate the lens [of the Gothic] I acquired during that time.



Another student writes about how the course content informs how they think about their major, “I also learned that psychology and literature are very closely related to one another which changes how I view my own major.” Clearly, the course content of the study abroad experience made an impression on these students, and the request to reflect on the relationship of the academic content to their study abroad experience elicited that awareness.

### **Limitations**

A larger number of participants from different institutions would allow a more diverse perspective. In addition, these students were all from short term study abroad programs of three to four weeks. Comparing short term study abroad experiences to longer term experiences would be instructive. Also, students were asked directly about their academic experiences in one of the survey questions. More detailed questions about their academic experience may have helped the participants remember more about this part of their study abroad program. Finally, this study did not involve interviews. In depth interviews with students at varying removes from their study abroad experiences would offer a more nuanced perspective of what they remember from their experiences.

### **Discussion**

When asked about what they remembered most from study abroad, students reported social and emotional experiences as their strongest memories. Travel and cultural differences were most important for these students, many of whom were travelling abroad for the first time. The enduring benefits students reported from their experiences included greater personal confidence and increased compassion. Without being prompted for the information, the academic content of the courses they attended was not the primary memory from the students’

experiences. These findings are consistent with the findings in previous studies. However, when prompted for how the academic content was useful to them, these students were generally able to reflect on the key concepts of their courses they took. Although the sample size for this study is small, we believe that the consistency of student reports of what was most important for them from their study abroad experiences is worth noting. Study abroad is clearly an important experience, often more for the “abroad” part than the “study” part. Curriculum planners need to embrace this student orientation and leverage the emotional impact of the experience to strengthen the value of the academic experience.

Savicki and Price (2015) suggest that it is not enough that students come in contact with different cultures, it is more important what meaning they make of those contacts. They assert that active reflection can support student meaning making. McKeown (2009) adds, “It is normal and human to attempt to resist these disruptive influences, especially in adulthood, but intense disruptions such as the shock of an international encounter are known to facilitate intellectual development if properly supported in the manner of a well run study abroad program” (p. 8). Findings in the current study offer a window onto how emotional experiences can inform academic experiences. Prompted reflection that links emotional experience with academic content can give the academic content a salience that it might not otherwise have. Learning how to support students to help them create their own meanings and insights linked to the academic content offers the potential of helping students remember beneficial, lifelong skills, and perspectives.

In our survey, students reported the academic study to be of low salience in their memories, however, viewing the survey as a post experience reflection in the open answer section, many were able to reflect on important key concepts from the courses they took.

Instructors must devise prompts to ask students to reflect on these key concepts in the context of the location. We suggest the following additions to study abroad curricula to support student engagement with the academic content of the program.

1. Incorporate explicit reflection so that students can make their own connections among their experiences. For example, journal assignments can ask students to observe, analyze, and evaluate their social experiences or course field trip experiences in terms of the topic of study.
2. Weave the key curricular points of the academic content explicitly into the study abroad experiences such that the cognitive and emotional parts of the experience can help reinforce each other. For example, visit key locations associated with the course content after class discussions of that content, and then ask students to pose questions, investigating, experiment, solve problems, and constructing meaning.
3. Create experiential content-based activities in the study abroad location that lead students through description and analysis to clarify their new personal insights being abroad and studying with how they can use this information in their future courses or their chosen career.

This work provides a snapshot and start of further possibilities. It should be noted that a larger number of students from different institutions would allow a more diverse perspective and provide further evidence. In addition, these students were all from short term study abroad programs of three to four weeks. Comparing short term study abroad experiences to longer term experiences would be useful. Students were asked directly about their academic experiences in one of the survey questions. More detailed questions about their academic experience may have

helped the participants remember more about this part of their study abroad program. The work presented in this article supports further investigation, and at the same time the need for more conscious connections between the academic and emotional experiences in study abroad.

The importance of the emotional experience of study abroad, the impact of the experience on identity growth, and the exciting novelty of the sites are clearly the high impact factors of study abroad. Garland, Farb, Goldin, and Fredrickson (2015) suggest in their “mindfulness-to-meaning” theory that thoughtful reflection enhances a person’s attention to an experience, and therefore expands the understanding of that experience. Making the academic content part of the transformative experience may enhance that experience and contribute to deeper learning. In summary, faculty and staff who design study abroad experiences need to take this reality into account in their academic planning. If the “study” part of “study abroad” is to have increased value, then it needs to be linked to the high impact social and emotional experiences of study abroad.

## References

- Beech, N. (2011). Liminality and the practices of identity reconstruction. *Human Relations*, 64(2), 285–302. doi:10.1177/0018726710371235
- Chen, A. Y. (2016). Students' perceived benefits of short-term study abroad programs: A case study of Hong Kong higher education. In D. Velliaris & D. Coleman-George, D. *Handbook of Research on Study Abroad Programs and Outbound Mobility* (pp. 163-187). Hershey, PA: IGI Global. doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-0169-5
- Coffrey, A. & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making Sense of Qualitative Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellinghaus, K., Spinks, J., Moore, G., Hetherington, P., & Atherton, C. (2019). Learning to teach in the field: Five professors tell how running an overseas study tour improved their classroom teaching. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 31(1), 169-189. Retrieved from <https://frontiersjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/XXXI-1-Ellinghaus-et-al.-Learning-to-Teach-in-the-Field.pdf>
- Garland, E. L., Farb, N. A., R. Goldin, P., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2015). Mindfulness Broadens Awareness and Builds Eudaimonic Meaning: A Process Model of Mindful Positive Emotion Regulation. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(4), 293–314.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2015.1064294>
- Isabelli-García, C. (2017). Second language acquisition and study abroad learning environments. *Elia*, 17(17), 273-282. doi:10.12795/elia.2017.i17.12
- McKeown, J. S. (2009). *The first time effect: The impact of study abroad on college student intellectual development*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Page, D. & Benander, R. (2018). *Assessing Intercultural Development in Study Abroad: Qualitative and Quantitative Complexity*. Paper presented at the Conference on the Development and Assessment of Intercultural Competence, Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language and literacy (CERCLL), Tucson, AZ.
- Pérez-Vidal, C. (2014). *Language Acquisition in Study Abroad and Formal Instruction Contexts*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Pyper, M. J., & Slagter, C. (2015). Competing priorities: Student perceptions of helps and hindrances to language acquisition during study abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 26, 83.
- Savicki, V., & Price, M. V. (2015). Student Reflective Writing: Cognition and Affect Before, During, and After Study Abroad. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(6), 587-601.
- Starr-Glass, D. (2016). Repositioning study abroad as a rite of passage: Impact, implications, and implementation. In D. Velliaris & D. Coleman-George, D. *Handbook of Research on Study Abroad Programs and Outbound Mobility* (pp. 89-114). Hershey, PA: IGI Global. doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-0169-5
- Sutton, R. & Rubin, D. (2010). *Documenting the academic impact of study abroad: Final report of the GLOSSARI project*. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA), Kansas City, MO. Retrieved from <http://glossari.uga.edu/datasets/pdfs/FINAL.pdf>
- Vande Berg, M., Paige, R. M., & Lou, K. H. (Eds.). (2012). *Student learning abroad: What our students are learning, what they're not, and what we can do about it*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

## Appendix A

### Student Survey

1. What year did you go on Study Abroad?
2. How well do you remember your experiences of your study abroad trip? (sliding scale from “not at all” to “very well”)
3. When you think back on your study abroad experience, order the following options according to which is sharpest in your memory, with 1 being most and 6 being the least .
  - a. Living in [the manor house]
  - b. Classes at [the manor house]
  - c. Classes during field trips
  - d. Socializing with fellow students in our group
  - e. Socializing with people outside our group
  - f. Individual travel
4. Order these experiences according to which was most powerful for you emotionally, with 1 being most and 4 being the least.
  - a. Social experience with the group
  - b. Learning about different cultures
  - c. Travel locations
  - d. Academic study
5. Do you maintain contact with other members of the group you travelled with? (sliding scale from “not at all” to “very often”)
6. Would you say that study abroad changed your worldview? (sliding scale from “not at all” to “very much”)
7. Would you recommend a study abroad experience to other students? (sliding scale from “not at all” to “very much”)
8. What do you remember most vividly from your experience?
9. What did you learn about yourself?
10. How did the study abroad experience change how you think or do things today, socially or at work?
11. What did you specifically learn in the course or courses in the study abroad program you took that you still use today?