
Special Issue

Study Abroad During COVID and Beyond

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

It is my pleasure to introduce to you this Special Issue on *Study abroad during COVID and beyond*, edited by Robert Blake, Professor of Spanish, UC Davis and Kimberly Morris, Assistant Professor of Spanish and World Language Education at the U. of Wisconsin, La Crosse. Both Bob and Kim have extensive experience with American study abroad (SA) programs, especially those in Spain, and with the major scholarship that has researched the relation between SA and the acquisition of both linguistic and intercultural competence in languages other than English. I wish to thank the authors and editors for this pathbreaking special issue that is sure to reinvigorate our conviction about the transformative potential of study abroad.

Studying abroad is an American undergraduate rite of passage that has traditionally been associated with living for a semester or a year outside the familiar environment one grew up in while studying the local language and getting acquainted with different ways of learning, living, and understanding the world from the safe context of an American program abroad. In the last 20 years, digital media and the internet have somewhat diluted the cultural authenticity of this experience, the spread of English around the world has further eroded the need to learn foreign languages other than English, and the cultural homogenization of the planet due to globalization have blunted the culture shock usually expected from study abroad. But the attraction of SA programs for middle class students who can afford them has remained a unique way of “seeing the world” while gaining American academic credit. It is also a way of acquiring social capital, making international friends, and preparing for international careers. For sure, gone are the days when American students were forced to speak the local language because their host family didn't speak English, or when they spent most of their time in Paris reading French novels out of fear of interacting with actual French speakers. Their progress in French would be a source of hard-won pride as would their deeper insights into the mentalities of people different from themselves – a humbling, but transformative experience.

Today's American students are eager to see in the real world what they have already seen in high definition on their screens. Some want to test their communicative fluency against the authentic native speakers, but this is more difficult nowadays since they are more likely to encounter immigrants, who are more comfortable speaking English. Others simply want adventures that will lead to what they call “personal growth.” Most realize this is one of the unique opportunities offered by the American collegiate system to get to know the world beyond their borders before they themselves get bogged down in building a career, having their own family...and repaying their college debts.

The advent of the global COVID-19 pandemic abruptly disrupted international travel and brought SA programs to a halt. Most group programs pulled their students back home in the middle of spring in 2020. Hence, the simplest affordances associated with study abroad that distinguish studying language in class from learning it in its natural environment suddenly became unavailable.

These immersive activities ranged from touring cities, historical and cultural landmarks, having spontaneous and chance interactions with locals, participating in the performance of local traditions and practices, sampling the local cuisine, visiting homes, engaging in domestic activities with host families and local peers, and developing a sense of community with fellow students. COVID upended all that and prompted among SA educators and researchers an in-depth reflection on the goals of SA in a globalized world. These goals include not only bringing language learners in contact with speakers of the language in their cultural environment abroad, but also bringing the current concerns about diversity, equity and inclusion to bear on foreign language study both at home and abroad.

The exciting array of papers assembled by Blake and Morris in this special issue gives a sense of the possibilities opened up by the pandemic in a post-COVID world. The papers bring to the fore the voices of scholars and administrators, program directors, educators and teachers, who share with us their quantitative and qualitative, sociolinguistic, methodological and pedagogical research findings. These findings are quite optimistic. Taken together, they offer a treasure trove of ideas on how to move beyond the replication online of what SA programs normally provide on location abroad, and explore what SA at home can offer language learners eager to develop intercultural communicative competence in the multilingual and multicultural context of U.S. society.

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