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Digital Identities and Study Abroad: Teaching Intercultural Competence through Social Media Literacy

Annie McNeill Gibson and Emily Capdeville

Abstract:

Social media platforms are contemporary spaces where selves are revealed and exposed in reciprocity. By imagining digital communication, technology use, and online representation in the same vein as we discuss the experiences of the physical self, the ability to adapt across cultures becomes a skill to hone online as well as in person. As such, digital media is a prime learning tool that practitioners in the field can utilize to reach their target student population no matter their physical location and during each phase of the study abroad process. In this way, study abroad offices can fulfill a mission that goes beyond the logistics of travel in order to concentrate attention on the development of student intercultural competencies.

Online spaces are the new frontier where study abroad educators can guide intercultural learning content for students engaging in study abroad. This paper will explore the importance of social media and digital spaces for identity and intercultural competency development among this generation of digitally engaged university students. While digital technologies have tended to be seen as an add-on responsibility for study abroad offices, these platforms can be reconceptualized as important tools for communicating learning content to reach students no matter where they are in space and time, whether they are studying abroad or on the domestic campus or whether they are engaged in the pre-, during, or post-study abroad phase. A learning-centered framework within the administration of study

abroad offices provides potential to incorporate intercultural learning objectives into the day-to-day office practices that compliment and extend the work of faculty committed to enhancing intercultural competence and responsible global citizenship. Digital media provides a platform for study abroad advising staff and student leaders to intellectually engage with students at all stages of study abroad through online platforms without dramatically increasing the office workload. Addressing technology use in students' international experiences validates the importance of online identities in the narration of self, encourages students to draw connections between online identities and academic curriculum, and educates students on narrating identities in interculturally competent ways.

Leveraging Social Media to Integrate Intercultural Competency Development into Study Abroad Learning Agendas

The study abroad office is often the initial interface for students that are planning to undertake a term studying, living, and learning in a foreign location. Historically, the majority of interactions that students have with the study abroad office, be they in-person or through email, happen during the pre-departure phase of study abroad. As application deadlines near, droves of high-need study abroad students frantically search for an advising appointment for assistance related to the logistics of researching programs, filling out applications, and applying for visas. This leads staff to often feel like travel agents or logistics technicians rather than educators or mentors.

Study abroad advising does not have to be restricted to the prescriptive activities of helping students complete applications and book airline tickets. Marc

Lowenstein explains that academic advising can be similar to teaching. By his analysis of a learning-centered approach to advising, the excellent advisor plays a role with respect to a student's entire curriculum that is analogous to the role that an excellent teacher plays with respect to the content of a single course (Lowenstein, 2005). In the case of study abroad, as staff are required to encounter study abroad students before, during, and after their international experiences, these offices are uniquely positioned to also guide students in developing their intercultural competency skills in order to help them draw connections to the components of their academic curriculums that are enriched by navigating different cultural perspectives around academics and selfhood.

According to Hammer (2012), "building intercultural competence involves increasing cultural self-awareness; deepening understanding of the experiences, values, perceptions, and behaviors of people from diverse cultural communities; and expanding the capability to shift cultural perspective and adapt behavior to bridge across cultural differences" (p. 116). Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) extends this understanding to its application during the communication process, "the symbolic exchange whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities attempt to negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation within an embedded societal system" (p. 24). According to learning models of intercultural communication, the ability to create shared meanings competently is dependent on both parties developing "a keen sense of adaptability and imagination when connecting across cultures" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 37).

The Georgetown Consortium Study (2009) laid out that the highest impact practice to increase students' intercultural competency is cultural mentoring. Anderson, Lorenz, and White's 2012-2014 study of 27 instructor-led short-term study abroad programs then expanded on this to reveal that "frequent and spontaneous facilitation is the most important variable to guide students intercultural learning. In their study, the three groups with the most pre-to post-Intercultural Development Inventory gains all incorporated this process holistically into their study abroad programs" (Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016, p. 12). Combining the conceptualization of advisors as teachers with the current research in study abroad indicating the important role of mentorship in the intercultural development of study abroad students, the Tulane University's Office of Study Abroad, guided by a Director of Study Abroad with a faculty appointment and teaching and research responsibilities, underwent a culture shift in its mission from a logistical one to an educational one, training staff and student workers to think of their roles as that of educator first and logistician second.

Tulane's Office of Study Abroad approached the learning period from pre-, during, and post-study abroad, similarly to a faculty member approaching the development of a course. Together, the office developed overarching learning goals to put into practice the research that indicated that self-analysis and mindfulness are key in the development of individual's intercultural learning (Ting-Toomey, 2012) and that this knowledge is most successfully developed through mentorship with frequent and ongoing reflection (Anderson, Lorenz, & White, 2016). Tulane's education abroad learning goals direct staff and peer advisor interactions with

students to help configure a teaching strategy to support student development in place-based awareness, self-awareness and critical reflection, flexibility, and adaptability.

Tulane's model of semester and year-long study abroad is based on a wide array of programs through direct enrollment as well as through third-party providers, all with varying degrees and often unknown amounts of cultural mentorship on site. Because Tulane's office has minimal influence on course content during the study abroad semester, applying the frameworks of intercultural competency in the digital realm via the website, social media, and the application process are paramount to effective and appropriate mentoring of students to develop connections between lived experiences, coursework taken abroad, and their own intercultural development in a co-curricular pre-, during, and post-process. Learning goals implemented through creating positive intercultural mentorship in the digital arena are a way to assume a role in student intercultural development regardless of program model or course.

Tulane University's learning goals that govern the work of the Office of Study Abroad are as follows:

Students studying abroad must demonstrate the ability to:

- Articulate personal and academic goals for study abroad, investigate all available program possibilities in relation to those goals, and understand how country and program-specific resources and limitations might impact the study abroad experience.
- Pursue these personal and academic goals in the face of uncertainty by assessing local resources and making adaptive solutions to practical challenges that arise before and while living and studying abroad.

- Acquire, synthesize, and apply knowledge that is region and country-specific, and that facilitates engagement with academic, civic, and professional cultures distinct from the United States.
- Empathize with and understand differing ways of living, communicating, identifying, interpreting, and belonging in the world.
- Apply these skills gained through study abroad to future intellectual, civic, professional, and personal endeavors.

Setting learning goals such as the above for the study abroad experience allows a faculty-led, administrative office to approach in-person advising, informational sessions, pre-departure orientations, and re-entry events in a learning-centered manner rather than simply as Q&A logistics sessions. The work conducted in the office is guided by the objective of increasing the intercultural competence of the students it serves. Crucially, it also provides the foundation for the development of a digital media strategy that expands the reach of the office's learning goals, allowing intervention in student learning despite their participation in dozens of different programs all over the world.

The potential of increasing intercultural competency at the university at large has a ripple effect with the potential to spread beyond the reach of the small physical office space. By using social media in the study abroad office, these administrative units can support the educational objectives of students that participate in study abroad programs beyond the physical space of the advising office. A digital office presence can spread out the dissemination of information throughout a student's four-year undergraduate career, providing opportunity for reflection during the pre-, during, and post-phases of study abroad and can provide mentors in the study abroad network with the resources to relate the meaning of study abroad to the rest

of the undergraduate curriculum. Most importantly, social media integration into the learning content of a study abroad office engages with the full-life experience of students who are already linking their online and offline identities as they develop their intercultural competencies.

Physical and Online Identities Intersect

Scroll. Click. Follow. The average U.S. student spends eight hours a day online (Kuh, 2001). Research suggests that they are most likely to be using social media sites that allow them to post pictures and videos, such as Instagram and Snapchat (Knight-McCord, et al., 2016) and are least likely to use social media for professional networking or to organize media into different categories. Current university undergraduates are using social media to bridge the gap between in-school and out-of-school learning by finding opportunities for connection between their academic curriculum, their personal interests, and the online communities and networks in which they are engaged (Ito, et al., 2013). Students are doing more than connecting their digital and physical experiences of the world, however. They are also doing the meaningful work of identity development.

Students are narrating, creating, and affirming key facets of their identity through their engagement with digital spaces. Orsatti and Riemer (2015) maintain that “The non-essentialist notion of identity stresses the social, and multiple nature of identity. A lineage of thinkers that has contributed significantly to establishing this view employs the concept of *narrative*, whereby the creation of identity is seen as a matter of narrating one’s life against the canvas of the social world and the shared stories that characterize our relationships with others” (p. 6). The narration

of self that takes place online against the backdrop of other stories intersecting in these digital spaces is the practice of identity-creating storytelling as described by Orsatti and Riemer (2015).

That this identity work is being done in the digital sphere is confirmed by Adriana Cavarero's work, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000), in which she explores how our conceptions of the self are fostered through and borrowed from narratives provided by others. Cavarero's insight is that we are narratable selves, we are exposed to tales of ourselves and others from birth, and we rely on mutual exhibition of narratives of the self for personhood. In short, recognition and identity stem from relational storytelling premised upon a view of humanity that is interactive, interdependent, and reliant on forms of togetherness. Thus our own tales are not enough. We are reliant on the narratives others have told us about ourselves in order to understand and create ourselves as we move onwards. Put most simply, we cannot remember or express our toddling selves with the clarity of a tale told by someone present, and such stories are crucial for the formation of identity and our ongoing relationship to ourselves. In essence, the basis of intercultural learning is to acknowledge this sense of interdependence among diverging narratives of our own identity as well as that of others and to recognize the importance of this interdependence in the digital as well as physical worlds.

This relational storytelling and identity creation is no longer limited to the stories we tell about each other in physical space; it takes place in the ever-present online space as well. Posthumanists would argue that whether or not you actively engage technology, the human condition itself means an embodied understanding

of our extended technological world (Pepperell, 2005, p. 34). For example, we must contend with the fact that, according to the Pew Research Center in 2018, 95% of adults in America over the age of 18 own a cell phone and 92% of Millennials own a smartphone. Even if we ourselves or our counterparts abroad do not engage technology at this rate, we must consider the experience/use of technology and the meaning of it on the narratives of all of us. Rather than considering online identity, built through a series of narrations against other selves in that same sphere, as being singular and separate from their physical one, Erik Qualman (2017) has argued that our online and in-person identities are multifaceted and intersect. With the use of technology in our everyday worlds, interactions have the potential to continue far beyond the time and space of the isolated events. As students upload, watch, and interact with media online, the audience, time, and space becomes infinite. The technological environment is part of the cultural environment that our students navigate during study abroad. Developing intercultural competency today means thinking about how narration of self is complicated by the intersecting digital platforms that new experiences across cultures create.

Recognizing that students are intrinsically using social media to make bridges between lived experiences and critical reflection reveals a potential blind spot where students may not be fully realizing their intercultural learning opportunities in the digital realm as well as a resource for educators to facilitate conversation and reflection about study abroad. This expansive usage of digital platforms must be considered when conceptualizing methods to increase educational connections between students and instructors. Not only must we reimagine the role of advisors

as an educational one rather than a logistical one, but we must also reimagine the spaces and ways in which educational advising can take place while also acknowledging the connection between online identities and physical ones. Online interactions act as an impetus for future offline activities, an integral part of present experiences, and a mechanism for nostalgia for events gone by” (Davis, 2014, pp. 506-507). As Jenny Davis explains, online and offline are distinct yet inextricably intertwined. As Kendall (1998) argues, cultural meanings of race, class, and gender flow into online identity meanings and offline interactions often privilege information gleaned through online identity performances. Rather than separate spheres, social life moves fluidly within and between the physical and the digital – neither more “real” than the other. In this vein, Deuze (2001) argues that networked individuals live not only with but also through and in media, leading to his designation of social life in the contemporary era as “media life” (p. 138).

This research underscores the imperative of and the opportunity for study abroad offices to utilize digital spaces to increase teaching opportunities and devote resources to establishing an online presence as part of advising and outreach. Because intercultural learning and competency development is inextricably linked to self-awareness and personal identity knowledge (Ting-Toomey, & Chung, 2012), the connection between the “real self” and the online virtual self during study abroad must be valued and explored. Experiential learning also requires reflection about oneself in conjunction with experiences out in the world. The traditional study abroad model is based around the idea that face-to-face interaction provides the most learning opportunities for students. However, if we conceptualize that U.S.

university undergraduates today embody their identities in online spaces as well as in person, then the study abroad experience has an online footprint. Some research suggests that students may be using online social networks to translate face-to-face interactions with individuals from the host country (Mikal, 2011). However, other research has found that conversely, students that rely heavily on electronic support networks from home are not connecting and forming supportive networks with individuals from their host country (Mikal & Grace, 2012). Because both of these anecdotes are true, study abroad offices can and should intervene in the digital space to guide how students use these digital networks, helping them utilize the online space to achieve the former rather than the latter. Declining to engage with students in this space can inhibit student development and intercultural growth.

Study abroad as a physical experience forces a student to react and reimagine identity through the encounter with the new, the different, the other. But the digital facet of their identity does not necessarily have the same mandate. The physical enters a space of intercultural encounter, whereas the digital is able to remain as inter- or monocultural as its user curates. As such, digital spaces can allow students to perpetuate the monocultural aspects of their identity, contribute to voyeurism or superficial experiences of the other, and encourage students to narrate the other in inauthentic ways just as easily as it can facilitate intercultural exchange. Facebook, Google, and other online search engines are programmed to help us find like-minded information and keep us from breaking into zones of discomfort. However, learning to engage interculturally in our digital spaces are ways of deepening our ability to adapt across cultures. Orsatti and Riemer (2015) argue that,

identity formation is inherently bound up with and achieved through the ways in which we engage actively and practically with the world and with the technology that is embedded in our practices. In doing so, the way in which this form of identity formation happens is not cognitive or thinking; it is “our most basic ability to live in and cope skillfully with our world” (Hoy, 1993, p. 173). Consequently, who we are is a reflection of how we engage in our everyday activities practically (Blattner, 2006, pp. 88-91). (p. 8)

Barbara Hofer has argued that the use of technology while abroad can provide an unnecessary cushion that protects students from having to engage in culture shock while abroad and, thus, limits their intercultural learning (Keck, 2015). However, these limitations occur if students engage in monocultural engagements in their online spaces, focusing only on online connections with people and experiences back home or similar populations in-country, rather than exploring their present world abroad. If educators train students to see their digital and physical spaces as intertwined and as equally important to intercultural competency development, the digital space can be reimagined as a space to enhance intercultural growth rather than simply a barrier to culture shock. By talking about digital communication, representation, and technology use in the same vein as we discuss the experience of the physical self, adapting across cultures becomes a skill to hone online as well as in person.

Observations from the Field on Guiding Digital Identity Reflection during the Study Abroad Process

Leveraging Staff and Student Leaders to Teach Responsible Social Media Use in the Pre-During-Post Study Abroad Cycle

The transformation of study abroad staff from primarily that of administrator to also serve as educators may be a significant culture shift for study abroad offices. The development of learning goals and an educational strategy are just the first steps

in this transformation. Staff and student peer advisors must themselves receive training and learning-centered mentorship so that they can successfully carry out and incorporate the office learning goals into existent in-person programming and student outreach, such as advising, information sessions and pre-departure orientations as well as translate this information into the digital realm. Preparation for this work includes developing staff and student worker:

1. Knowledge of intercultural competency theory;
2. Knowledge of identity development theories; and
3. Experience with social media platforms and content creation/curation.

This training is part theoretical and part practical. Staff benefit from training to deploy social media platforms in educational ways because they are learning about student development theories, expanding their professional skill set by increasing their fluency with digital technologies, and embodying a more rewarding educational role rather than a logistical one. Employing student workers to manage social media alongside them also offers advantages to the selected student. This professional opportunity introduces them to the field of international education as a potential career path and helps to develop the capacity to conceptualize and implement meaningful projects that contribute to the office's mission while also building his or her skill set as a peer mentor. Finally, student workers who are also study abroad alumni are empowered to carry out the educational plan of the study abroad office through social media which continues and deepens the student worker's reflection process and intercultural competence begun while abroad.

At Tulane our investment in staff professional development around intercultural competency theory translated into sponsoring advisors to become qualified administrators of the Intercultural Development Inventory as well as supporting and incentivizing them to engage, present, and publish in professional conferences that would deepen understanding of the values of Tulane's learning goals and intercultural competency and provide new frameworks for implementing identity-based mentoring in in-person and online platforms. Our office strategy is defined by the investment in students' digital identity development as an equal facet to their in-person or physical identity, underscored by the necessity of coaching interculturally competent digital behavior. As the research underscores, the line between the digital self and the physical self is blurry; these two identities are in fact reflections of each other rather than separate and singular entities. As such, the office takes responsibility for educating students on interculturally appropriate social media use just as we take responsibility for educating students on appropriate in-person behavior while abroad.

Study abroad offices can strive to co-exist with students in digital spaces to guide their undergraduate experiences prior to, during, and following their time abroad. Research shows that intercultural competency development outcomes are higher if students receive educational interventions before, during, and after their experiences (Fantini, 2004; Hoff & Kaplar, 2005). Employing this cyclical vision of our students' experiences, we can use social media to enhance the in-person work that is traditionally done during information sessions, study abroad fairs, and one-on-one advising. If we further acknowledge the advantages of engaging students

online, offices can create a strategy to think about social media and other digital platforms as important spaces for the development of their intercultural mindset and as opportunities to intervene digitally during study abroad when in-person interactions are impossible. Internet use enhances the reach of education abroad offices to provide virtual support and curated information for students into the digital spaces that they naturally inhabit. By validating the importance of intercultural digital identity development, the use of online platforms and the time spent maintaining them can be viewed as valuable office practices that strengthen the work of study abroad staff as educators.

Staff and student workers can be trained on the type of content and engagement that should exist in this digital sphere. By employing this model, offices are able to generate an enormous amount of content, and staff and student workers are able to receive valuable professional experience in digital content creation and curation while developing avenues for learning at all phases of the study abroad experience. Finally, the content created online produces valuable analytics with insights about the number of students who engage with learning content. This information can both be used to measure the success of office initiatives and to communicate the importance of global initiatives to the undergraduate experience with important stakeholders.

Pre-Abroad

Study abroad offices often conceptualize pre-study abroad research as reading a book or listening to music from the host country, but, in fact, our students are often engaging with the host country online in more dynamic ways than is likely

imagined. In the pre-study abroad phase, students often research a potential study abroad location by following other study abroad students in their digital networks who may be in that location, understanding the host country from a perspective similar to their own. Rather than ignoring this activity, staff and peer advisors can engage the student in this digital arena. An office's learning goals can be achieved by conducting research in the traditional methods listed above but also then probing students to use social media to research and interact with local institutions, organizations, and people in their potential study abroad locations, even interacting with them in that space through comments and likes or other electronic communication.

The student worker can model this behavior on the office's social media sites and the staff can incorporate the encouragement of this learning behavior in advising appointments and pre-departure sessions. Rather than ignore the fact that students often reach out to study abroad returnees in the digital space, educators can coach students on how to interact fruitfully with host country natives as well, helping students develop a digital identity that will include the footprint of engagement in intercultural exchanges with people and institutions in the host country. Online activities, such as following local music listings, liking a local university club, meeting a student from their host country in a virtual forum, or researching nonprofit organizations that work on a theme of their own interest can foster a significant level of engagement with the host country even before they set foot in country. This activity pushes students to start to achieve the learning goal to acquire, synthesize, and apply knowledge that is region and country-specific, and

that facilitates engagement with academic, civic, and professional cultures distinct from the United States in their online world, preparing them to do so in person.

While Abroad

While abroad, social media can offer both pitfalls and opportunities. Intervention on behalf of the study abroad office can mitigate the negative aspects of social media use and leverage the opportunities to achieve intercultural learning objectives. One such opportunity arises when students use social media to post photos and captions about their experiences. This posting activity can be viewed as tantamount to the journaling and reflection that is encouraged as part of a plan for intercultural competency development (Williams, 2009). But, the potential also exists for student reflections about intercultural exchange to be detrimental if the reflection is done without guidance and if the narration of self and others has not been fully developed. For example, the critique of reflection without intercultural awareness in digital spaces is made clear in the popular Instagram account “Barbiesavior,” which critiques the white savior complex often associated with study abroad and international voluntourism and illustrates what can go wrong when reflections on experiences abroad are polarizing rather than bridging of cultural difference.

Navigating these pitfalls requires an approach that: 1) develops the reflection skills to narrate student engagement with local experiences abroad; 2) encourages an understanding of digital media usage in the host country as part of cultural competency gains; and 3) reinforces a student’s awareness of his or her power and privilege when representing other cultures on a social media feed.

Study abroad offices can use guiding prompts to help students abroad reflect on their engagement with the local study abroad experience through Instagram takeovers of the office of study abroad account. As explained in the example below, when an Instagram takeover is guided correctly, it allows students to both produce more thoughtful posts about their host country and teaches skills about engaging and narrating in online spaces that will affect the narrative the student is sharing on their own digital media feed and will impact the lived experiences that the student will have in the host country moving forward.

The key to maximizing such online intercultural learning is to train student leaders to recruit their peers abroad to participate in the takeover and then offer guidance to maximize intercultural reflection for that student during the takeover activity. In the *Day in the Life* Instagram series at Tulane's office of study abroad, for example, when a student agrees to participate in a takeover, the student worker then guides the specific types of photos and captions that the takeover student will produce.

All of the prompts during the takeover include the following:

1. Students share images of their local, lived experience that highlight their intercultural learning process. The student worker makes suggestions, such as: What can you share about your daily experience that demonstrates how your host culture is different or unique from the experience that domestic students may be having in the U.S.?
2. Students share images that reflect the local culture beyond voyeuristic tourist images. The student worker establishes a dialogue with their peers to inform choices about the type of representations of their host country culture that they will share with a wider online audience.

3. Students include captions that reflect the interaction between themselves and the culture that they are showcasing. The student worker creates models of captions that portray deep insight of local context as well as an acknowledgement of the power and privilege of the student who posts.

The takeover achieves advising goals as well by giving prospective study abroad students a curated insider view of their peers' semester abroad. This content, grounded in the office's learning goals, both helps the study abroad student reflect on their intercultural experience and models the type of in-person experience we hope all study abroad students have, one that critically reflects on the place, the people, and the culture of their study abroad destination as well as the meaning of their role in it. This guided reflection helps train study abroad students to think about their experiences *in conversation with* the local culture while also modeling meaningful reflection for future study abroad students who are consuming the content.

Because the guidance comes from a peer, it seems to be fun and interesting, rather than prescriptive education. Often, we find that lecturing on intercultural learning is perceived by students as "getting in the way" of the enjoyable aspects of study abroad when culture-general frameworks are not successfully integrated with local culture-specific examples. Peer interaction during the takeovers allow students the ability to create culture-specific examples from their everyday experiences of the general frameworks that we hope they explore. Additionally, it may lighten the load on staff: the work is getting done but the staff is not doing it alone, the students are, thereby potentially solving capacity issues. Finally, this type of student-

generated, student-centered content also helps maintain a reputation as a student-friendly office which generates future online and in-person engagement.

The second potential pitfall in using online networks while abroad is when students' social media usage in-country does not adapt to social media norms in their host culture. Just as objective and subjective expressions of culture may change in a students' physical experiences abroad based on host culture norms, successful intercultural competency development would indicate that those expressions should also change in their digital space.

In-person interactions in a host country require students to investigate how their expressions of identity, language use, style of dress, etc. may conflict or conform to those same expressions of host country nationals. Students should also be asking questions about their own social media usage and that of their counterparts abroad in order to be cognizant of possible dissonances between the two. In doing so, students become aware of the ways that their technology use can enhance or disrupt their intercultural engagement while abroad. Students must first understand *how* their host culture uses social media and digital spaces. Only once they understand the norms of usage can they incorporate their digital identities into that local context more adequately. In some locations, this is a matter of safety. For example, in the case of studying abroad in much of the Middle East, students who are LGBTQ must think carefully about what they will disclose about this piece of their identity both in person and online. Even if not for reasons of safety, however, when a student learns the norms of usage in their host country they will have better luck adapting. Knowing how local events are broadcast and communicated in the context of their

host culture allows students to find, follow, and attend events more fully informed regularly. Learning the platforms that locals use to connect and meet to work on projects allows them to be more likely to insert themselves into study groups with host country nationals.

Once students recognize that engaging with people, businesses, and organizations in their host culture online will not happen in the same way as it does in their home culture, new avenues open up through which students can explore their host culture on a deeper level. Cuba, where author Annie Gibson worked as faculty resident director on semester and summer programs for Tulane University from 2011-2016, is a clear example of the need to include a sense of digital media literacy even in spaces where students' first interpretation may be to interpret it as being void of connectivity. For students to truly become culturally competent in navigating Cuban culture and social life, they must learn to interrogate the meaning of their own perception of its absence and seek to understand what fills the void. While it may be easy to realize that Cuban businesses do not use Instagram to advertise, part of learning to operate effectively within the Cuban cultural context is to then understand the platforms that are being used to disperse information in its place and the ways in which technology takes on different forms in the Cuban context to fit that social reality.

Though social media platforms exist in Cuba, public access to the internet just began to be available for public usage at WIFI hotspots in designated public parks and plazas in 2015 (ETECSA, publication year). Prior, access to WIFI for the general public was available only for those with connections to high powered

people or businesses allowed limited hours of connectivity or through individuals who had developed creative ways of tapping clandestinely into state-approved internet connections. Cuba has notoriously poor internet connectivity and all internet usage has been regulated by the state-owned telecommunications company, ETECSA. Transition to public WIFI access in Cuba has physically transformed the geographies of Cuba's cities. Students studying in Cuba who learn to navigate access to information as Cubans do will learn about "*El paquete semanal*," a weekly one terabyte collection of digital material collected through the Cuban diaspora abroad and then distributed on the underground market in Cuba as a substitute to broadband internet, which continues to be expensive for the general population. "*El Paquete*" continues to be a primary source of information for millions of Cubans and only becomes visible to students as they come to understand Cuban mechanisms for mass communication. Also, as public broadband internet becomes more available, access to the paid WIFI hotspots in plazas and street corners scattered throughout Havana become recognizable and interpreted in a new way once students understand the background of that social space and its social norms. The first interpreted absence of connectivity then reveals complex social networks that bring the act of intimate connections to friends and family abroad via cell phones and computers or advertising for businesses and social events into the public arena. Students learn to navigate where they can purchase the cards to connect to WIFI as well as who in their neighborhood is distributing the hard drive of the "*paquete semanal*." Their digital media fluency in a Cuban context develops along

with their ability to navigate a dynamic private market, its idiosyncrasies, and the close connection between public and private life in Cuba.

The third potential pitfall of social media use is that in narrating their study abroad experience, students may represent their study abroad to an audience back home in ways that can sometimes be irresponsible or inaccurate. Edward Said's groundbreaking theoretical study famously revealed East Asia to be an assemblage of mental maps and socio-cultural attributes constructed, represented, and consolidated through the discourse of orientalism, a large-scale enterprise which, ultimately, served to define and consolidate Western identity, since "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said, 2003, p. 3). Studies have explored how the field of study abroad itself can reaffirm the very stereotypes that engagement across cultures is supposed to mitigate, reinforcing Western stereotypes of the other as explained by Said (Caton & Santos, 2009). Mukherjee and Chowdhury (2014) employed orientalism as a framework to conduct qualitative content analysis of flyers advertising study abroad opportunities sponsored by U.S. social work schools, arguing that orientalist stereotypes are prevalent in the marketing strategies of study abroad offices and that this has negative impacts on student learning outcomes.

We cannot afford to ignore social media activity in digital spheres simply because we don't understand it or don't have the capacity to handle it. We must become serious about digital media literacy for students, faculty, and staff. Because social media requires us to populate and narrate our lives and the lives of others in

a public forum, we must recognize that ourand our students'interactions in such spaces matter now that we are all in a position to narrate the other to infinitely large audiences. By acknowledging and addressing the implications of narrating the other in digital spaces, we develop the expectation that our students will as well.

Students often post quickly without time for reflection while tired, sick, experiencing culture shock, and faced with unfamiliar surroundings. To counteract this tendency to post irresponsibly and teach responsible narration practices, study abroad offices should consider editing their own marketing practices and model desired posting behavior so that it becomes a normal influencer in the posting strategy of the students that engage with the office. In the vain of social media influencers, staff and student workers can be harnessed to post in such a way that takes into account the potential stereotype reinforcement that Said cautions against. Rather than romanticizing the encounter with “the other” and advertising study abroad as a method to learn only about the self, staff and student workers can be tasked with conceptualizing ways to reframe study abroad to accentuate other mental models of conceptualizing the world and highlight the adaptive behaviors necessary for engaging in productive intercultural encounters. When we prepare students to understand the emotional markers of culture shock and provide them positive models of interculturally competent digital identities, they are more likely to develop a critical digital identity for themselves.

By returning to the foundation of the learning goals established by the office, staff and student workers can brainstorm how study abroad is an experience that changes both the self and the residents of the host culture, in both potentially

positive and negative ways. The content that is funneled into the office's social media sites can encourage students to consider these positive and negative effects of study abroad. Staff and student workers can also be trained to identify dos and don'ts of social media posting. Do the office's marketing materials reinforce the notion that study abroad is an exotic encounter with an other? Does the content on the office's social media feeds reinforce that same notion? If so, how can the content be modified to demonstrate an authentic, researched, and empathetic encounter during study abroad? While office staff may not have the bandwidth to revise all marketing materials and social media content, student workers can be trained to assist.

Using these digital spaces allows the office to model appropriate, interculturally sensitive content to prospective study abroad students and the university community at large. Not only does this behavior send a message to prospective students that social media is a tool that needs to be used responsibly, its accessibility also renders it available to those in the host culture. The message is that study abroad is not treated as an experience of objectification but one of rich cultural exchange and thoughtful encounters.

Upon Return

Finally, upon return from abroad, students can utilize social media to contribute to the achievement of the fifth learning goal outlined earlier in this paper, "apply(ing) these skills gained through study abroad to future intellectual, civic, professional and personal endeavors." Through social media, students can maintain their connections made while networking in their host country by creating and

maintaining digital linkages on social media long after study abroad is over. When students return from abroad, they should ask themselves if their social media was marked by the experience, if their time abroad has added new people in their online friend network, and if there are any ways in which their online identity has now changed since studying abroad. These connections made while abroad in physical and online spaces have the potential to develop new intercultural relationships on these digital platforms, allowing for an integration of their study abroad identity into their now reimagined “home” identities. Rather than experiencing complete disassociation following their study abroad experience, engagement with digital spaces in productive ways may reduce some of the impacts of return culture shock while also continuing a students’ intercultural growth.

Encapsulated in the aforementioned learning goal, one purpose of study abroad should be for students to reach the realization that global exchange also has the potential to exist in their domestic experience. Rethinking their digital presence upon return to campus as being one that fosters new intercultural exchanges helps the students continue to develop the skills in cultural bridging learned while abroad. A digital media profile for the study abroad office, which engages returned students as well as international students and diverse followers across the globe and cultivates an understanding of the global in their local community, is an essential modelling practice. This integration can ensure that the sojourn abroad is not a separate facet of their university education but a vibrant, ongoing part of it. Finally, because the online experience of a student lives on in the virtual world long after the physical experience has ended, students can return back to the posts, reflections,

and ideas from their study abroad time and develop that content even further for their personal and professional use.

As the conduit between university students and their life-changing experiences abroad, study abroad educators are uniquely positioned to offer opportunities to returned students that are exciting, educational, and meaningful for their professional development. Students often return from their study abroad experience with a deeper understanding of how they learned and grew while abroad. They often also want to maintain a connection to global experiences as a way of continuing their connection to their host country. Harnessing the enthusiasm of these students, along with their digital fluency, allows offices to train and utilize student leaders to complete most of the social media work outlined in this paper. Utilizing students to do this work requires planning and mentoring that can serve as a deterrent. Once built, however, the students can take the lead on projects and consistently produce content throughout the year.

Conclusion

Social media is a vital platform that study abroad offices can utilize to move their mission beyond the logistics of applications and travel, to allow study abroad practitioners to play the important role of engaging students and colleagues in international initiatives on campus and abroad, to stimulate and support student academic and career planning, to incorporate the realities of living in a global world, and, finally, to assess, evaluate, and track progress in these fields. Barbara Hofer (2008) explains that the proliferation of affordable and accessible modes of communication—email, smart phones, texting, Skype, Facetime, Facebook, Viber,

WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat-has made it possible for college students to connect with a frequency that would have been unimaginable only a decade ago (p. 21). She asserts that there are both positive and negative outcomes to the use of technology abroad and that it is essential for students and study abroad professionals to have an awareness of technology's impact on the experience. This paper has argued that since students live their lives online as much as in the physical world, these facets of identity co-exist, and so to ignore their digital identities in their intercultural development during study abroad would mean to miss out on a whole segment of the ways in which students experience the world. While face-to-face interactions with students are limited to the physical space of the office, the connections that can be made in the digital world are unlimited. By grounding these online interactions in an office strategy based in intercultural competency theory, study abroad offices can mentor students to reflect upon their online identities in meaningful ways. Staff and select students become co-educators and co-creators of intercultural learning content while fostering the development of social media savviness and digital identity negotiation.

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