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Academic Risk and Intellectual Adventure: Evidence from U.S. Honors Students at the University of Oxford

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Abstract: Many study abroad programs promise students self-knowledge through adventure. Those that involve intense study seem at first sight not to offer adventure nor to entail risky dislocation nor to offer new insights into self. However, evidence from study abroad students at the University of Oxford reveals that they describe intellectual endeavor as adventure, finding that their academic experiences pose risks, demand courage, and are the means through which they and their new surroundings accommodate one another. Oxford faculty encourage academic risk-taking by posing hard intellectual challenges, helping students find their own voice rather than summarizing the views of others, and having a grading system that emboldens students and rewards those who learn through their mistakes. Oxford faculty encourage students to take risks in their writing and dare to apply to good graduate schools but help them to submit carefully prepared applications to avoid unnecessary hazards. Home campus advisers can help honors students by recognizing those for whom study is adventure and by encouraging them to risk a rigorous intellectual study abroad program.

Keywords: foreign study; theory of self-knowledge; cross-cultural engagement, undergraduates; academic writing

In *Conversations with James Joyce*, the novelist remarks, “in my opinion the modern writer must be an adventurer above all, willing to take every risk, and be prepared to founder in his effort if need be. In other words, we must write dangerously” (Joyce and Power 95). Academic honors students in Oxford follow Joyce by framing their writing and their study in general as adventure, not as a means of playing it safe. Their tutors abroad and advisers

at home can foster in them desirable academic risk-taking while helping them avoid undesirable hazards.

ADVENTURE AND STUDY ABROAD

Risk and adventure are prominent themes in study abroad programs. Program weblinks emphasize “adventure” (e.g., weblinks for International Partners for Study Abroad; IES Abroad; GoAbroad.com.; and Brilliant Abroad). Study-abroad-as-adventure narratives are premised on the trope of the bold adventurer risking contact with the exoticized Other and, through authentic experience, winning the prizes of self-discovery, global competence, and personal resilience. Such narratives are ethically dubious in some respects (Doerr; Cavanaugh et al.; Lewin; Woolf) and internally contradictory in others (Pettersen and Rye), including in their presentation of risk. For instance, students are offered risk while their parents are offered safety, and students are promised life-changing experiences if they dare to take the risk while programs are ever shorter so that students need not risk jeopardizing their normal schedules (Janda; Thatcher). Adventure narratives also seem ill-suited for the rigorous academic study abroad programs that the most intellectually ambitious honors students have traditionally considered (Bodfish); reserved for those whose grades show they have favoured the library or laboratory over more daring pursuits, they have extensive study requirements that limit the time for venturesome activities abroad.

Research with honors students in one highly rigorous study abroad program, Wycliffe Hall’s Scholars’ Semester in Oxford (SSO) for Registered Visiting Students at the University of Oxford, however, revealed that in their blogs some of them couch their Oxford experience in the language of adventure and risk: “I’m ready for this adventure” (“Courtney Abroad”); “Now, to the next adventure” (“Widening Circles”); “My Oxford Adventure” (“Binding Scattered Leaves”); “Adventures in Oxford”; and “My Awfully Big Adventure.” “Risk” and “adventure” also regularly appear in survey responses from SSO students from 2011 through 2019, from which all quotations are taken unless separately referenced. “Adventure” is sometimes used ironically—“my awfully big adventure,” for example, plays on British tropes of irony and understatement—but there is a prevailing sense that, for these honors students, study abroad is an intellectual adventure and entails beneficial risk.

TEMPORAL DISLOCATION

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there,” wrote L.P. Hartley in *The Go-Between* (9). Oxford’s ancientness attracts study abroad students, but their awe of the past poses risks. Following Walter Benjamin’s description of the “aura” of art whose social exclusiveness is its purpose, Lewis warns against the “aestheticisation of academics” in some study abroad programs (Lewin xvi). The aim of some “cultural immersion” programs in historic European cities, he suggests, “is less to develop students as critics and more to enable them to move seamlessly between North American and European bourgeois culture” (xvi). However, being in ancient cultures also presents learning opportunities. The spatial dislocation that study abroad entails can foster the personal development of students abroad through “constructive disequilibrium,” Che, Spearman, and Manizade suggest following Vygotsky’s and Piaget’s theories of learning and development. Students indeed find that Oxford’s temporal foreignness can have a dislocating effect. For example, one student used the language of adventure to describe how a familiar experience became Other because of a building’s ancient beauty: “I ventured into the most beautiful library in all of existence” (“My Oxford Adventure”). Another found ancientness unexpectedly disconcerting rather than comfortably quaint. “Experiencing old buildings was enriching in a way I didn’t expect . . . the sense of history reminds you how small you are, that you are in place where so many have gone before. This was not something I even knew was on the agenda.”

Students’ temporal dislocation thus presents risks and opportunities to Oxford study abroad faculty as they guide their students. To address the risks of aestheticizing academics, SSO faculty oblige their students to take a critical view of Britain, including its fantasy pasts and the uses made of them. SSO students face questions such as “What do war memorials encourage Britons to forget?” “Why are there so many statues of slavery abolitionists in Britain, but only one museum of slavery?” “What is the point of the (British) Commonwealth?” To seize the opportunity of temporal dislocation, the syllabus makes students confront presentism—the interpretation (and often criticism) of the past using the standards of today—and other types of essentialism. SSO students must interrogate historic objects or events according to contemporary, not modern, standards (“Why are the contents of the Magna Carta so very different from what most people expect?” “Why did many Britons support their ‘American brethren’ in the War of Independence?”) and

confront the historical meanings of words and concepts whose current usage is different (“What did Locke’s contemporaries understand by “liberty” and “property?”” “What was Celtic Christianity and what is it now?”)

RISK, COURAGE, FEAR, AND THE ACADEMIC PROJECT

A classic trope of adventure stories is the risk-laden quest, and Oxford study abroad is often couched in the language of a quest for learning: “I love . . . reading about your adventure in searching for knowledge!” commented a relative on an Oxford study abroad student’s blog whose title spoke of “adventure” (“Cold Coffee Cup”). Another classic trope is finding that the quest leads, actually or metaphorically, home. Honors students in Oxford regularly speak of such a homecoming—sometimes just because of unavoidable familiarity, sometimes by way of self-congratulation (Doerr), but sometimes sensitively and complexly. “I was not so much an outsider as I was a new insider,” wrote one SSO student in “AfterOxfordThoughts” as she explored how she and Oxford had changed to accommodate each other. Others link feeling at home to the academic project, specifically to the act of writing: “To call Oxford ‘home,’ I have to be a part of Oxford. . . . I am writing myself a role in the story of this new world with all the people I meet, the places I go, and all the beautiful things I see. . . . When I write home, I am writing myself ‘into home’” (“My Awfully Big Adventure”). The writing is part of Oxford, part of making home, and part of the adventure of the blog title. Moreover, some SSO students link the courage needed for risky study abroad with the courage needed for the academic project: “And wow, will Oxford help you see just how big your life can be. Living with courage is . . . like writing—you just do the next thing” (“Widening Circles”).

SSO students thus link courage, adventure, home, and writing in the context of the Oxford undergraduate writing process into which they have plunged. In the conversation cited above, Joyce says, “The important thing is not what we write, but how we write. . . . A book, in my opinion, should not be planned out beforehand, but as one writes it will form itself . . . [what] we want to avoid is the classical, with its rigid structure” (95). Though Oxford tutors are probably relieved not routinely to receive student essays that resemble *Ulysses*, Joyce’s strictures epitomize something of the Oxford writing system at its best. That system is summarized below, with comments from SSO students following.

1. The Oxford tutor sets the question for each week's essay, using the question to push the student down unexpected paths. For example: "Why has globalization been accompanied by a rise in the number of small states?" "Should we try to have whatever beliefs will best promote the general happiness?" "Is literary narrative where theory takes place?" "Is all art social?" "Is it possible to achieve the main aims of a legal system without a legal system?" "Why has anarchism as an intellectual and cultural trend been forgotten in the historiography of modern Japan?"

The questions are very thought out and very difficult to answer and involve a lot of thinking.

I liked the questions. . . . I could write on things I'd never thought about before.

Those questions! I realised I'd spent the rest of my life pitching myself soft balls.

2. The timeframe for answering the question is short—at most a week—forcing students to interrogate ideas and form an argument ready for the week's tutorial during which the essay and the week's reading for it will be discussed.

You need a teacher who asks awkward questions, to be directed to evidence which poses awkward questions, and a tight deadline to answer the awkward questions in.

3. The essay question and subsequent tutorial discussion require that the writer come to a view, not just summarize those of others.

I liked the questions that needed an answer that had to come from me, not just the books.

4. Simplistic answers do not survive the scrutiny of the tutorial.

I always used to write nice tidy answers, with all my points all neat and tidy: at Oxford I learned to enjoy the messiness and complexity.

History here seems complex and nuanced, not the like the black and white picture [I produced] back home.

5. Answers are always provisional, since they are a weekly statement of interim views, not the final word on the matter.

In the US you're told to start your paper with a thesis statement so you know your answer before you start writing. Here you start with a question, which forces you to open up and accommodate surprising findings.

6. Essays are not individually graded; instead students get one overall grade at the end of term. This means they can risk trying a new approach or daring argument, and if thereby they discover for themselves why certain arguments, techniques, or strategies do not work, they are likely to achieve higher final grades than their peers who have sat neatly on fences all term.

I want the freedom to be bold in my thought and analysis, even if often wrong.

I liked the fact that you could take risks [because of the grading system].

I learnt how to be wrong well.

Students describe the system as initially “daunting” or “terrifying” and talk of the courage needed to “push through stress” and keep up with the “daunting pace,” but they recognise that it is “scary but rewarding,” “challenging but beneficial.” This is the language of risk and of an adventure that proves its worth (Palfreyman).

RISK, THE OXFORD TUTOR, AND THE ACADEMIC HONORS STUDENT ABROAD

A study abroad program for studious venturers should oblige them to risk the new, local style of learning but simultaneously equip them for graduate study in which the already familiar U.S. model sets the pace internationally. For this reason, alongside the tutorial essays described above, SSO students produce a longer undergraduate research essay, planned with an adviser but written wholly independently. Advice and mentoring sessions about graduate school encourage students, emboldened by having flourished at Oxford, to apply to first-rank schools. In such applications, good preparation to minimize risk is wholly beneficial and reminds us that esteeming risk and adventure is an Anglo-Saxon idiosyncrasy. Baffled by the tendency for British polar expeditions to rely on heroic, skin-of-the-teeth adventuring, Icelander Vilhjálmur Stefánsson remarked, “Having an adventure is a sign that something

unexpected, something unprovided against has happened; it shows that some one is incompetent, that something has gone wrong. For that reason we pride ourselves on the fewness of our adventures” (164–65). Tutors need to judge when risk brings benefits and when not, and graduate school application is the time for meticulous planning, not risky spontaneity.

RISK, ADVENTURE, THE HONORS ADVISER, AND THE ACADEMIC HONORS STUDENT ABROAD

Honors advisers at home can be reassured that steering intellectually focused students toward academic programs rather than more obviously adventurous ones is not playing safe: such programs are equally, if differently, adventurous. Advisers can also be assured that their recommendations need not apologize for intellectual students who are not obviously venturesome. The SSO program has fruitfully accepted students with recommendations that included the comments “not a leader on campus,” “has shown no leadership qualities to date,” “quiet,” “reserved in class,” or, possibly my favorite, “always wears a tie.” Regardless of their prominence in extracurricular activities, volubility in class, or mode of dress, intellectual risk-takers will enjoy the adventure and reap the rewards of highly academic study abroad programs.

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