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A Journey into Our Own Backyard: Helping Students Discover Their Voices and the Treasures of Home

Karina Stiles-Cox

The world is a great book, of which they that never stir from home read only a page.

At my university, hundreds of students participate in our study abroad programs each year, and as most participants will tell you, those types of experiences have a lasting and quantifiable impact on them. Traveling, unequivocally, changes their lives. They come back new people having acquired and cultivated cultural sensitivity, educational and career opportunities, a new or broader perspective and world-view, greater self-confidence and independence, and perhaps even new language skills.

But I work at an institution of more than 28,000 students, so the reality is that “hundreds of students” is not much. Most of my students will never tap into those international traveling opportunities. In fact, I’ve come to learn that, even at a nonacademic level, the majority of my students will never venture beyond a two-hundredish-mile radius. Having grown up and lived between two countries and resided in six US states and counting, I found my own informal discovery alarming and fascinating. Second only to teaching (and that’s probably because teaching affords it), my greatest passion is traveling. And while I constantly preach its benefits from my lectern, whether it’s a semester abroad or an impromptu road trip, I began to consider how to simulate that experience to the many students who would never leave their hometown.

Thanks to a colleague, the challenge turned out to be easier than I’d anticipated. After brainstorming and collaborating for several months, we piloted a travel-based literature course in the fall 2016 semester--Introduction to Literature: Veranda Voyages. Though our reading lists varied, the theme was the same: journeys, both literal and figurative. But the real-life application was in the semester-long project, a local travel blog. Since most of my students were born and raised here, writing about their hometown seemed as exciting as one of my MLA documentation lectures. They were under the impression that they already knew everything about this little area on the border of Texas and Mexico, and it wasn’t much. Thus, I challenged them to lure visitors to this area by highlighting local gems and hidden treasures. The travel blog would consist of a short introductory video and four blog entries, each highlighting a specific locale, activity, or event. In an effort to foster student interest (besides the threat of “it’s 60% of your grade”), students were asked to pick a theme for their blog. The response was remarkable. As students’ academic and personal interests came into focus, the project picked up steam, and the end result was a rich and varied collection of travel blogs on history, architecture, gastronomy, outdoor adventures, music, festivals, sports, art, the supernatural, and environmentalism.

Still, the students never really left their verandas, so what exactly did this travel project simulate?

New Perspective

Without a doubt, the first groan I encountered from my students when introducing this project was that there was nothing exciting, new, or interesting in this area. But as the blogs began to unfold, students discovered key battle grounds, rare birds, ghosts, breath-taking views, local bands and artists, volunteer opportunities, new hobbies, and the still hotly debated best-tacos-in-the-Rio Grande Valley. No, not every blog was a homerun, but every student did attain new perspective of their home turf. They looked at the same familiar scenes with new eyes and, indeed, found treasures.

Confidence

For me, the most delightful part of this project was watching my students' confidence grow as they developed their blogs, and this growth was most evident in the tone of their writing. They found their voice, and with each added blog entry, their writer's voice grew stronger. What started off as shaky and uncertain in the first blog entry became clever, insightful, and knowledgeable by the finished product. Moreover, they felt experts in their subject and peppered their blogs with historical information, interviews, statistics, and first-hand accounts of the featured gem. And since all I gave them were instructions, many of them had to learn how to navigate and create their blog site, insert hyperlinks, compress pictures, and edit and upload videos. They went out into their community armed with little more than their smartphones and trepidation--sometimes alone, sometimes with a buddy--and explored, captured, interviewed, evaluated and, ultimately, came back seasoned travelers of the Rio Grande Valley.

Cultural Sensitivity

To be honest; I didn't expect much in this category. As I already mentioned, we live in a bi-cultural area on the border of Texas and Mexico. Students from this area have already been exposed to another culture, or at least a mix of two cultures, so this one seemed like a given, but here, my students surprised me again. Many of my students study here but live in Mexico. Every day, they cross the international bridge to pursue their degrees, and it is no secret to our little border town that things on the other side of the Rio Grande are not so safe. Because of political and social turmoil, visiting Mexico, even our sister border town, Matamoros, has become a risk. We can see it from the safety of the university parking lot, but we dare not venture there. Over the last several years, even the mere idea of crossing into Mexico is met with immediate negativity. The beauty of its culture, food, music, and history has been lost to the fear of violence. To my surprise, the travel blog offered those international Mexican students a forum to showcase what is still good about their country. Their blogs highlighted safe places, fun places, family-friendly places; and in the process, they educated their audience beyond drug cartel headlines. They showed events and pockets of Mexican border towns where community life still thrives. Their blogs offered glimpses into oases where laughter, good food, cultural pride, and *fútbol* are still enjoyed.

Personal Development

The final part of the project was a two-part reflection on the travel blog. The first part asked them to consider their journey and discovery; the second part asked them to reflect on several of their peers' blogs. Given some of the resistance I met at the beginning of the semester, I expected canned responses, and while, yes, I received some of those, I was also moved by their renewed enthusiasm for and new-found insight of their hometown. After reviewing their peers' blogs, some took up hobbies in cycling or watersports. Some ventured off the main roads on the promise of a hidden burger paradise. Some made plans to volunteer at historical landmarks or support local artists. Some made dates with ghosts while others sought peace and gained new appreciation for the beauty and sounds of the area's natural landscapes. But mostly--and in many cases for the first time--they felt pride in their hometown and community. They had a better understanding of the culture and the area in which they grew up. They found richness, beauty, intelligence, and significance in the overlooked, colorless, dull, and pedantic. They had something to brag about.

In the end, the travel blog project didn't add pages to their grand and worldly travel books, but just as valuable, it made their home--their roots--more than just a footnote.









Visit some of our student Travel Blogs using the links below:

Veranda Voyages Team Chachalaca: <https://sites.google.com/site/verandavoyages27chachalaca/>

Veranda Voyages Team Falcon: <https://sites.google.com/site/verandavoyagesfalcon/>

Veranda Voyages Team Grackle: <https://sites.google.com/site/verandahvoyages27/>

Veranda Voyages Team Green Jay: <https://sites.google.com/site/verandavoyages27greenjay/>

Veranda Voyages Team Ebanos: <https://sites.google.com/site/verandavoyages28ebanos/>

Veranda Voyages Team Huisache: <https://sites.google.com/site/verandavoyages28/>

Veranda Voyages Team Jacaranda: <https://sites.google.com/site/verandavoyages28jacaranda/>

Veranda Voyages Team Mesquite: <https://sites.google.com/site/verandavoyages28mesquite/>

Veranda Voyages “Wanderlus”t:
<https://sites.google.com/site/jacaranda31verandavoyages/home/e-r-m-wanderlust-1>

Veranda Voyages “Lap Swimming in the RGV”:
<https://sites.google.com/site/jacaranda31verandavoyages/home/yvonne-rodriguez>

Veranda Voyages “Supernatural Purgatory”:
<https://sites.google.com/site/mesquite31verandavoyages/home/crystal-vega>

Veranda Voyages “I Got Lost for A Burger”:
<https://sites.google.com/site/mesquite7verandavoyages/home/ernesto-farias>