

INCREASING INTERCULTURAL LEARNING IN STUDY ABROAD THROUGH ACTIVE PEDAGOGY: THE CONSORTIUM FOR ADVANCED STUDIES ABROAD (CASA)-SEVILLA PILOT PROGRAM

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Abstract

This paper reports on the steps taken to deepen cultural immersion and intercultural learning in all the dimensions of the Consortium for Advanced Studies Abroad (CASA)-Sevilla, narrates the initial evaluation results, and outlines additional themes under development. It also explains the “action research” approach Cornell Abroad, Penn Abroad, and the CASA-Sevilla staff and faculty took to redesign the program and implement the changes collaboratively.

Keywords: Pedagogical reform, action research approach, intercultural competences, active learning strategies.

1 INTRODUCTION

The CASA-Sevilla Study Abroad program was founded in July 2015 as the first representative in Spain of the Consortium for Advanced Studies Abroad¹, and heir to the previous exchange agreement between the US Universities of Cornell and Michigan (Ann Arbor) and the University of Seville founded in 1984². This institutional transition led to a profound pedagogical reform of the program in search of a new model of cultural immersion, with the support of the Cornell Abroad and Penn Abroad offices.

CASA-Sevilla students enrol as regular students at the University of Seville where they attend classes during a semester or an academic year along with Spanish and Erasmus students. They live with host families and receive personal and academic support through the program Center, which has a permanent, full-time staff, and a number of part-time faculty and tutors. In addition to this, to facilitate their immersion in the local society, students have access to all services available to the University of Seville students, and upon arrival they receive information on the wide range of cultural, sports and leisure activities in the city. With all these tools at their disposal, the students are expected to be proactive and to establish their own contacts with local society.

However, faced with the increasingly poor results of this model of cultural immersion in recent years, during the spring of 2015, program staff, faculty and tutors engaged in an action research project [1] led by Anthropology Professor Davydd Greenwood³. As a result of this profound self-evaluation process, certain problems were detected in the existing pedagogical design, as we will explain below.

2 THE CHALLENGE OF ADAPTING TO THE NEW GENERATION OF STUDENTS

The socializing tools offered by the program were effective until recently when the use of technology and social networks began to change the students' social behavior patterns. Instead of interacting with their host families, students began to spend their free time in their rooms, chatting in English with family and friends in the United States, or watching TV series and movies on the internet. Instead of attending office hours to discuss academic matters with their professors at the university, they preferred communication via e-mail. Instead of spending quality time in Seville, students traveled out of town most of the weekends, enacting a modern version of the *European Grand Tour* and turning cultural immersion into mere tourism.

¹ CASA is a non-profit consortium of ten leading research universities formed in July 2014 for the purpose of organizing and delivering rigorous education abroad programs in collaboration with leading world universities. CASA member institutions are: Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Northwestern, Trinity College, Pennsylvania and Vanderbilt.

² The University of Pennsylvania joined in 1991.

³ Goldwin Smith, Professor of Anthropology Emeritus, Cornell University. Expert in action research.

In addition to the technological bubble, we must note the great gap between residential life on United States university campuses and the Spanish university system [2]. In their home universities, American students find a highly managed environment that permeates all personal and social aspects of university life. Being admitted to a US university means entering not only a learning environment, but also a social relations system. Entrance in the university also marks the end of direct family control of daily life. Parental care is replaced by the custody of the university institution. As a consequence, universities make many of the decisions that would be the student's own responsibility as young adults in Spain. In addition to being a teaching institution, the US university becomes a legal guardian, psychologist, career counselor, nurse and socio-cultural events impresario. These services are easily available to the students, who see them as the most natural thing in the world.

Seville has two public universities, but it is not a university city with inclusive residential campuses. This causes a major culture shock for most American students. The University of Seville is a teaching institution through which students can participate in a series of activities that serve only to complement the already very rich social and cultural life of the city. At the same time, the city of Seville offers itself as a "classroom", full of vestiges of the vast historical legacy of the peoples and cultures that have lived here. American students, however, deprived of their university tutelage, feel disoriented and find it difficult to develop their own strategies to relate to local society. Their logical reaction, then, is to take refuge in the bubble of American-and Erasmus- students who share the same situation, losing touch with a society that seems "closed" to them. The students seek protection among their peers, thus avoiding situations outside their comfort zone. They reach the end of the semester having established only minimum contact with local society and, therefore, without having had the opportunity to challenge their previous ideas regarding the culture in which they have lived during a few months. As a consequence, their linguistic progress suffers and their knowledge of the local culture becomes anecdotal and superficial.

To this we must add other challenges. There is a great disparity in the levels of Spanish language skills and academic backgrounds that students bring to the program. On the one hand, the grammar and conversation classes we offered during the orientation period were a good opportunity for students with intermediate level skills to improve, but they were insufficient to help advanced level students and heritage speakers. Furthermore, there were no other opportunities throughout the semester to advance to higher levels in the target language.

In addition, there were no structured opportunities for the students to connect their own learning itineraries with their personal and academic interests and motivations. As we have learned from a comprehensive survey carried out among students (5, 10 and 15 years out from participation in the program), our typical student does not currently fit with the cliché of a humanities student. Many are headed into careers in medicine, law and business in the future. The traditional humanities approach to study abroad, then, was no longer sufficient.

Given this new scenario, in order to obtain the best learning outcomes, it seemed necessary to design a more open and flexible program that could fit the needs and interests of the students and help them enhance their personal progress. It was also crucial to adopt an active learning approach that would engage students in more context-appropriate language use and socio-cultural behavior for increased intercultural learning.

3 NEW PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

To address the aforementioned issues, CASA-Sevilla turned the previous orientation course into a semester-long course, with the title: "Beyond the Stereotypes: Encounters with the History, Society, Language and Culture of Seville". The course, which was offered in the fall of 2015 for the first time, is based on the six active pedagogy strategies outlined below:

3.1 Linguistic Progress

The first major challenge we faced was to provide students with the motivation and arguments to continue working on improving their language skills during the semester. For this purpose, we use an adapted version of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to assess student language support needs at the beginning of the semester and design individualized programs to improve their skills in needed areas during the rest of the course. In addition to this, students self-classify their skill levels in the relevant areas of linguistic competence using the same reference framework. This gives them specific awareness of the aspects that they need to keep working on.

The application of this methodological approach has produced outstanding results so far.⁴

3.2 Balance between Contents Transmission and Teaching of Research Skills

In many academic disciplines, teachers favor the transmission of contents over the teaching and practice of research skills. This leaves students without the tools they need to continue learning independently outside the classroom. Considering that our students spend most of their time abroad outside the scope of the program, we found it important to introduce pedagogical approaches that would activate independent and active learning.

To begin with, students receive basic information on Spain in three cultural modules:

- Understanding history and the impact of the past on the present
- Understanding society and culture
- Understanding art and art history

Moreover, they are introduced to ethnographic techniques, bibliographical research skills (in Spanish) and various artistic analytical techniques. During the first weeks of the program they have classroom assignments where they can use and perfect these tools.

The ethnographic method holds that learning is favored by contact or interaction with a natural cultural environment [3]. Our challenge is to persuade students to act as ethnographers: selecting research topics that will allow them to establish comparisons by observing social situations in a direct way, collecting data, conducting interviews, advancing hypotheses, and testing them. In this way, students become interested in what local society does, how it behaves and how it interacts, trying to discover its beliefs, values and motivations.

“We had several conversations with our host parents about delicate issues, like abortion and the Spanish dictatorship. I was grateful that they felt comfortable speaking frankly with us. I did notice some cultural differences through our conversations: political correctness in Spain is different than in the US. I understand my host parents are well-intentioned and they are nice people, so there is no need to judge them for comments that in their culture are not offensive.” (Student, Spring’16)

During the first stages of the course, our students have several opportunities to put the ethnographic techniques of participant observation and in-depth interviews into practice. These assignments are carried out mainly with their host family members, with whom they discuss issues of local culture, community life and politics, and participate in activities in the neighborhood where they live. These moments contribute to turn the host families into cultural informants and reinforce their personal relationships.

“Living in a university dorm has nothing to do with living with a Seville host family. It took me a while to understand this. Small details such as the way I closed doors, the time I took my showers or the way I used the mirror made a difference here. I had to learn not only to respect my host mother’s wishes, but also to take my neighbors’ expectations into account. I did not know all of the neighbors knew each other and formed like an extended family. They rely on each other in times of difficulty.” (Student, Fall’15)

To complement these tools, students learn the DEAL model for critical reflection (with which they can Describe, Examine and Articulate Learning), an analytical framework that helps them make learning meaningful [4]. Critical reflections connect their past experiences with their present observations of Spanish culture, and project this learning towards their future experiences. By connecting the past with the present, students have the opportunity to question whether their analytical framework (from their own culture) is adequate to understand the new context, a task that leads them to recognize preconceptions and to formulate new interpretations.

3.3 Experiential Learning

Experiential learning approach in CASA-Sevilla program has two main goals: that students not only learn sitting in class, but also from direct contact with real situations outside the classroom; and that

⁴Further explanation of this pedagogical method can be found in the paper given by Juan Muñoz, “Improving Linguistic Progress in Study Abroad by Linking Intercultural Competences and Cultural Immersion: Using the CEFRL as a Learning Tool in CASA-Sevilla”.

they learn to establish links between the concepts and theories they study and their personal experiences. Experiential learning provides the place where they can contrast and compare information, as well as the subjects they can observe and interview to find a solution to their questions. Last but not least, experiential learning puts students in touch with members of local society, helping them to establish connections outside the "technological bubble". In addition to their host families, as explained above, the program frames this type of learning in two settings:

✦ Community Organizations

"I had a really great experience of integrating into the community. The radio station is a community of free expression. It is a place where you can think about the systematic problems in Seville and our society. Thanks to the conversations with my tutor, I learned about the importance of community platforms. After this experience, I was able to make comparisons with my summer job working for a program on a private television channel. I realized that public organizations are more important to changing democracy around the world and giving the people a voice." (Student, Fall'15)

CASA-Sevilla maintains collaboration agreements with some local organizations in which students do supervised work for two hours a week throughout the semester, and they have to reflect on their experiences on a regular basis. Our partners represent a wide variety of interests and provide students with an extensive range of meaningful experiences. Beyond intercultural learning, some students recognize that participating in their organization has changed their perspectives, not only about Spanish culture but also about the world.

✦ Cultural visits and Study Tours

"In the 1960s, Spain adopted the slogan "Spain is Different" to emphasize its unique historical legacy and cultural traditions vis-à-vis the rest of Europe. The idea still attracts lots of tourists to the country -Spain is the third most popular touristic destination in the world- but it also hides true Spain behind it. This marketing strategy influences tourists' opinions, creating an idealized reality that does not completely exist. There is much more below the surface." (Student, Spring'16)

We restructured program sponsored cultural activities so that students could distinguish between authentic culture and stereotypes, while at the same time understanding the difference between cultural immersion and tourism. Our activities provide them with patterns of behavior and learning that they can reproduce on their personal trips out of town. We usually focus on local (and regional) sites of interest and the activities involved are closely linked to the lessons learned during the cultural modules. To encourage active learning, these visits require prior preparation, through reading articles or watching videos on topics relevant to the place. During the visits, students are assigned different tasks and, at the end, they must share what they have learned, thus bringing different perspectives to the group.

3.4 Personal Projects

"Both extreme right and left parties understand Francoist monuments like living symbols of the dictatorship, therefore they do have a political significance (in present-day Spain). As a History student, I don't think that dismantling the "Valle de los Caídos" is a solution at all. I would rather make it an "antifascist memorial", respecting its historical value but adding commemorative plaques in memory of Republicans killed during the war and in subsequent years, as well as descriptions of Franco's crimes. In my own country we still maintain Stonewall Jackson's monuments and that never bothered me before because these people and their beliefs were a part of our history – we need to remember this terrible time. After doing research about the current situation in Spain, though, I know that these monuments are more than stone pieces. Now I believe it is necessary to change the way they are presented to the world, in Spain and the US". (Student, Spring'16)

An effective way to encourage students to continue learning from their own experiences outside the program is to make them responsible for their learning process, recognizing that each one has his/her own interests, expectations and motivations. To make this happen, the students undertake an individual cultural research project throughout the semester, in which they must use the research techniques practiced throughout "Beyond the Stereotypes". The final result is included in an electronic portfolio (Wix format) at the end of the semester, where they also reflect on the most important

lessons learned during the course. E-portfolios offer them the opportunity to feature their learning outcomes using a variety of graphic resources (text, pictures, videos, charts etc.).

Another way of engaging students in independent learning is asking them to write individual “Learning Contracts” (or Lists of Personal Goals) where they establish certain cultural and linguistic goals. They also have to think of specific strategies to achieve these goals and have to establish a semester plan for the effort. These lists are overseen by one of the program tutors and can be revised as students increase their knowledge of the cultural environment and become aware of the time available.

The Learning Contract is a tool that works quite well for the most structured and focused students, but for others it is only an assignment that they do not develop to its full potential. In any case, it supports the general philosophy that the students can progress independently and develop their own learning strategies.

3.5 Mentoring and Collective Learning

In our previous pedagogical design, there were numerous occasions in which program faculty and staff acted as cultural mentors, intervening in a positive way in the students’ learning process. The new CASA-Sevilla program structures this mentoring system collectively through the use of Blackboard software, so that students can receive constant support during the semester from all members of the teaching team. Blackboard integrates the students’ assignments and reflections as well as comments and rubrics by faculty and staff. In addition to this online platform, we have scheduled a series of group presentations throughout the course, in which students, faculty and staff share learning and exchange experiences and advice. Combining both systems we achieve a 360° mentoring system.

During the first two semesters of our new design, the use of Blackboard posed a great technological and educational challenge. Having an average of twenty students and ten members of the teaching team involved in the use of the platform, with a high rate of deliveries and comments, was not always easy to manage. In some cases, online mentoring created personal conflicts (due to misunderstandings, lack of follow-up, or desynchronization). More spaces had to be created in the course for personal relationships outside the platform, causing certain weariness among faculty and staff. We continue working to make this online resource a practical device better adapted to our needs.

3.6 Formative and Summative Evaluations

“Despite the huge work invested in starting the program, assessing it in a continuous and simultaneous way during the semester and designing improvements for the spring, the fall difficulties have helped us to rethink nearly all the aspects of the program in order to carry it out in a more flexible way, adapting to the circumstances and needs of each group of students. Reflecting on the sources of the problems and their possible solutions has made us stronger and better prepared for the future.” (Staff member, Fall’15)

In order to evaluate the impact of the new pedagogical approach, we established a set of formative (interim) and summative evaluations involving faculty, staff and students. Each semester, there are at least two moments in which information on the functioning of the program is exchanged, adjustments are made, and changes are proposed for the next semester. In addition, home universities conduct debriefing sessions with students a few months after completing the program, to close the evaluation circle. These processes are now integrated as an on-going practice.

As a result of the evaluation conducted after the fall semester 2015, the program produced a co-authored monograph (in English and Spanish) documenting the reform process and the results of the first attempt at the new design. The monograph serves as a base for further evaluations, since it reflects on the successes and failures of the program and points out further challenges.⁵

4 CONCLUSIONS

“Cultural Catholicism is different in practice from traditional Catholicism. Cultural Catholicism is the identification and the belonging to a community without necessarily being religious. They can be atheists but still identify themselves with Catholicism. The

⁵ Copies are available on request from Eva Infante Mora, Resident Director, CASA-Sevilla at eva@sevilla.casa.education.

idea of popular Catholicism is unique and complex but many Andalusians may be identified with it. Festive occasions, families and values play a huge part in Andalusian culture and are very connected to Catholicism. Cultural Catholicism is the key to understand Andalusian culture.” (Student, Fall’15)

After the initial rollout of the new pedagogical design, end of semester portfolios show that students successfully:

- Apply basic knowledge and research techniques learned during the early cultural modules to their own ethnographic research projects during the semester and to their final reflections about their homestay and service learning experiences.
- Learn how to develop and put into practice strategies to achieve their own learning goals.
- Demonstrate a greater willingness to understand and incorporate new ways of thinking and behaving.
- Learn to accept that success, failure and frustration are all parts of the learning process.
- Show a greater competence in overcoming stereotypes and preconceptions.
- Go beyond the limits of cultural tourism and become residents of their own neighborhoods, participating in activities with their host families and community partners and acquiring local habits.

The reform has generated a variety of other activities, including preparation of articles for professional publication and the development of a new instrument called “The Common Framework for Intercultural Learning”, modeled on the very successful deployment of the CEFR.⁶ It has been designed to support staff and faculty in mentoring students in the direction of developing intercultural competencies beyond language facility. It will be tested for the first time in the fall semester of 2017.

None of these changes could have been possible without the commitment and collaboration of local faculty, tutors and staff. All of them have put their experience with the program and their personal contributions at the disposal of an innovative and ambitious pedagogical design, which from the start is producing excellent results.

“Without any reference points or previous data, putting into place such an innovative program can be very tricky. We have been learning about and applying a world of new concepts and practices.” (Faculty, Fall’15)

We should not, however, hide the difficulties that all members of the program have faced since the beginning of the reform. Thanks to the action research process, faculty, tutors and staff have been the protagonists of the changes and have been able to contribute with their own ideas to address the problems detected. But the transition to active pedagogy and the inclusion of experiential learning has not always been easy. Numerous meetings were needed to exchange many honest opinions to achieve a design that was not only satisfactory, but also viable. In our reform, we have had to overcome a number of logistical obstacles, such as budget constraints, limited availability of faculty and tutors (most of them only employed part-time by the program) and the need for the course not to exceed the number of contact hours dictated by home universities.

The biggest challenge we face, though, is the clash between how most students understand their study abroad experience and how we think they could make the most of it. In the fall 2015, we realized that, for the average American student, cultural immersion is almost synonymous with tourism. Even when in their Learning Contracts they express a desire to immerse themselves in the Spanish culture and progress in the Spanish language, their behavior usually keeps them away from those goals. One of the first conclusions of the ongoing evaluation process was therefore the need to address this issue at the beginning of the course, to make them aware of the consequences of their choices and to help them make sound decisions during the rest of the semester.

Another example of an obstacle to active pedagogy is the students’ tendency to avoid uncomfortable situations, attributing these critical moments to failures in the organization of the program. Experiential learning confronts students with real situations outside the classroom, so cases of uncomfortable situations multiply in this course. From the outset, faculty and staff understood that failure, frustration and discomfort can become useful moments for learning, as well as those situations that cause

⁶ Described by Davydd Greenwood in the paper “Enhancing Intercultural Learning through Active Pedagogy, Program Integration, and Individualized Student Mentoring: the CASA-Sevilla Program”.

surprise, both positive and negative. Transmitting students the importance of failure or at least discomfort as a valuable opportunity (at the same level as success) is not only a challenge, but it also has direct consequences for how we evaluate the final results of the learning process.

Despite the difficulties and the intense work involved in re-evaluating our pedagogical proposals, the new design also brought the teaching team great satisfaction. Witnessing how students are able to understand some aspects of the Spanish culture that remained previously unnoticed or misunderstood; how they move into situations and social contexts that were previously beyond their reach; how they establish deeper and more respectful relationships with members of the local society; and how the learning tools they acquire in the program stay with them beyond their Seville experience. In short, we are seeing how we have managed to address the problems that we detected in the previous pedagogical design through our combination of re-imagining immersion and our hard work.

In conclusion, CASA-Sevilla program is today an open system that evolves and adapts to the changing needs of students and the emerging challenges. As we have shown in this paper, new times and new generations require innovative, creative pedagogical approaches.

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