On the Backs of Turtles

By Chris Deegan

The people of the United States are in a unique place, moving perhaps at a different speed, and many times with different destinations than much of the rest of the world. The mythology many people in the United States carry with them about the world, and the place of the United States in it, can be powerful impediment to learning about other places and cultures. Tests of our own fundamental beliefs and understandings in and of others and ourselves are best undertaken in an environment where at least part of the learning becomes intuitive and, thereby, sustainable. Thus study abroad programming can be a powerful opportunity for students to access and inherit multiple layers of cultural knowledge through firsthand experience.

However, with Internet access a common, even ordinary, mechanism added to the undergraduate toolbox, there is an increasing potential for speed and comfort in both the learning and teaching process. Might this emerging digital environment, in a study abroad setting and especially if tweaked by prolific communication through e-mail, unwittingly distract the student from core learning attributes gained from studying and living in another culture? Can appropriate balances be found between and among cross-cultural dialogue, interaction, and collaboration and the seeming imperatives to constantly "be in touch" with other lives and environments through e-mail?

Apropos of Turtles

In his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz tells the story of an Englishman in India who, having been told that the world rested on a platform, which rested on the back of an elephant, which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked "And what did the turtle rest on?" The response was, "Another turtle."

"And that turtle?" the Englishman continued to press. "Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down."[1]

Geertz uses this story to explain the incomplete nature of any form of analysis, particularly in relation to the discovery or understanding of culture. The analogy is useful also to look at how we construct meaning and knowledge from the digital information we collect, where each form is a derivative of another form; turtles resting on the back of yet another turtle.

In this environment of changing and competing positions and identities, how are representations formed? This is a central challenge of learning about the other; about difference. It prompts us to think about what Geertz describes as "thick" and "thin" description of culture. It is, in the end, not the act of "doing" (e.g. studying abroad), but rather understanding *why* we do it that matters most.

An Infinite, Amorphous Culture?

Martin Ryder from Colorado University presciently argues that "the proliferation of information technology is leading to the creation of entirely new sets of spatial, cultural, and social relations. Virtual communities have emerged from the intersection of humanity and technology…and the World Wide Web is now arguably history's largest human artifact."[2] He goes on to say that this cyber community can be "extremely volatile with little context beyond what is there at this minute, and its contents are easy to create, change, move, and delete. The Web has no coherent structure and there are no rules governing its contents. Yet even in this seeming chaos, a skilled user can locate any of the billion Web data objects within minutes—if not seconds—using common search engines and browsers. But unlike the modern electronic media of television, radio, and film, this

postmodern medium is open to mass *producers* as well as mass consumers … and it is spawning instant experts."

Are the cognitive and affective domains becoming unbalanced, so the tool of a computer to retrieve information becomes a stronger implement in defining culture than the literacies that are critical to human interaction, like dealing with assumption, contradiction, and counter-intuitiveness? How do we manage so much information in a hugely dynamic digital environment? How do we even begin to think about what it is we need to know; need to learn; need to teach?

Rethinking Theory and Practice
Those involved in study abroad programs have a unique opportunity to weigh in on these curricular development issues, particularly what we can call *meta-curriculum*: a curriculum about the curriculum of study abroad; its pedagogy, its purpose, its intended results; to explore what we do, and why we do it, by stepping back and looking with a wider lens; to begin to think about what directions we can choose to be advocates of learning and not merely transmitters of transcripts.

Theory
As a particular kind of laboratory for undergraduate knowledge acquisition, the exploding digital environment is now forcing our hand. We need to step back in the same way that a reader of a novel, who has far more information about the unfolding situation than the protagonist, can step outside the stream of events and evaluate the story. We need to reevaluate what we are advocating for in this new information gathering landscape.

When we are on the Internet or using e-mail, we have lost a certain sense of "place." Place has been transformed, for the time being, onto a computer screen. Actually the whole concept of place changes because we are *there* yet at the same time not there but *here*. The technology of cell phones is not dissimilar. Making a call, the first thing so many of us say is "Where are you?" Even if we dial an area code in Chicago, the person we are calling may well be answering in New Orleans or Baltimore. Somehow geography, and by extension its progeny of cultural landscape, is being re-*placed* by technology.

Practice
Although we are connected as users to computers through operating systems (e.g. Windows) and browsers (e.g. Netscape), if we stop and think about it, we don't want computers—we want information and computers provide a visual tool. At the University of Geneva there is work being done on 3D-computer modeling to bring life to historical monuments. They have developed reality models of two Turkish mosques of the Ottoman era in the sixteenth century in which the user can actually move around and explore the buildings in real time, giving a sense of "being there."

At Texas Tech there is an archive of Turkish Oral narratives being collected for Web posting. These include recordings as well as transcripts of indigenous stories and traditions collected by anthropologists and other field researchers. It's now available to anyone with a computer.

In Washington, D.C., the Library of Congress has three complete and perfect volume sets of the Gutenberg Bible. Printed on velum in the fifteenth century, its composition is too fragile now for multiple page turners. Recently the Library digitally copied all 1,300 pages as a PDF and made it available on CD.

At Washington University in Seattle, there is a site called Silk Road Narratives, which is a collection of historical texts. This caravan trade route through central Asia is often used among Asianists as a geographical thread off of which a student can discover and discuss cultural interchange in

historical time and space, from the eighth-century-B.C. Chinese accounts of visits to Rome, to the memoirs of Babur, the extraordinary founder of the Moghul Empire of greater India in the sixteenth century.

These are examples of the growing trend of Web digests, indexes, and topical lists. With even low-level technical ability, a user can now collect text, streaming video, audio, and still photos all with zoom-in/zoom-out capability. Yet it is what Geertz refers to as thin description; a one-dimensional zone of cognition.

Fostering Intentional Learners
Through study abroad programming, the goals should include helping students become more intentional learners. Our hopes should include that those students could apply their study abroad learning and experience to better define the world they live in. And our evaluation should note that because of their seemingly intrinsic motivation of curiosity, study abroad students develop a different relationship to the product of their work…work which includes learning about differences, acquiring new language skills, widening their categories of knowledge, and integrating cross-cultural information.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities is already working on the larger themes of curriculum in the twenty-first century in the context of creating a "new understanding of civic learning." In their 2002 *Greater Expectations Report*, they argue persuasively "that students need to be prepared to assume full and responsible lives in an interdependent world marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and destabilizing inequalities. Societal and cognitive development results when students step out of their comfort zones into contact zones, through participatory learning dependent on dialogue and collaboration."[3] They recognize the undergraduate cocktail of being wired to the Internet, keeping up the pace, and getting results is lethal to what is more and more commonly being referred to as the development of an "intentional learner."

Less than 1 percent of U.S. postsecondary students go abroad to study and there is a trend to shorter programs. IIE reports nearly half of study abroad students now go for less than a full semester.[4] The contact zone is shrinking.

David Gelernter, an artificial intelligence scientist at Yale offers a helpful metaphor in a structuralist framework: "If you have plenty of money, the best consequence (so they say) is that you no longer need to think about money. In the future we will have plenty of technology—and the best consequence will be that we will no longer have to think about technology. We will return, with gratitude and relief, to the topics that actually count."[5]

— *Chris Deegan is director, Study Abroad Office, University of Illinois at Chicago.*

Endnotes
1. Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
2. Ryder, M. 1998. "Spinning Webs of Significance," a paper delivered at the Fourth Congress of the International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory. Denmark.
3. Musil, C. 2003. "Educating for Citizenship," in *Peer Review*, Volume 5, Number 3.
4. *Open Doors 2003*. Institute of International Education. New York
5. Gelernter, D. "The Second Coming—A Manifesto," Edge Foundation Web site: http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/gelernter/gelernter_index.html. 07/28/01.