By Michael Vande Berg

Student Learning Abroad: Three Stories We Tell

SINCE THE YEARS SHORTLY BEFORE and just after the First World War, when the first U.S. colleges and universities began in a formal way to encourage students to earn a part of their academic credits through study in another country, three paradigms with very different assumptions about learning have unfolded, one after the other. In the first, students abroad learn simply by being exposed to the new and different. In the second, since students do not seem to be learning merely through coming into contact with the new and different, educators take steps to immerse them in the experience. With the third, students learn as educators help them develop competencies that allow them to reframe their experiences and adapt their behavior to new cultural contexts.

What are students learning through participating in education abroad—what do they know and understand, and what are they able to do, that they would not know, understand, or be able to do had they not gone abroad?

That we can roughly identify the periods during which each of these paradigms came into prominence—the first emerged just before and after the First World War and reached its peak in the 1970s, the second peaked in the 1990s, and the third is rapidly gaining ground as the new century progresses—does not mean that every member of the education abroad community embraced the assumptions of the second paradigm during the 1980s and 1990s, nor that by some future date all of the members of the community will be informed by the assumptions of the rapidly emerging third paradigm. What the uneven unfolding of these three conflicting accounts of learning and teaching abroad does tell us, however, is that members of our community have over time been responding in strikingly different ways to a series of questions: What do we mean by "learning," at home or abroad? What are students learning through participating in education abroad—what do they know and understand, and what are they able to do, that they would not know, understand, or be able to do had they not gone abroad? What should we make of student reports that studying abroad is "transformational?" What evidence do we have that students abroad are learning to interact more effectively and appropriately with culturally different others? Do some programs promote student learning more successfully than others? What do I need to know, and what do I need to do, in order to be a responsible study abroad educator?

Identifying the basic assumptions that guide us to respond in different ways to these questions, assumptions that normally remain beyond our conscious grasp, is of course challenging. Critical theory's "master narrative" concept offers a useful approach to helping us bring the assumptions of the three study abroad paradigms into fuller awareness. Our master narratives reveal the ways we organize our lives into meaningful patterns. They also guide us and other members of the community to selectively perceive those things that confirm our basic assumptions, and to ignore, minimize, or distort those that do not.

Historical Context for the First Narrative

At the beginning of the twentieth century, decades of uninterrupted material progress in parts of Europe and in the United States held out the promise that mankind would eventually unravel the mysteries of an essentially material and objective universe. Advances in science, agriculture, medicine, engineering, travel, communications, manufacturing, and many other fields had materially improved the lives of millions.

As the First World War ended, the nineteenth-century Grand Tour tradition offered U.S. faculty and students more than a list of desirable travel and study destinations: it also gave shape to the development of early program models. The Junior Year Abroad looked back to a time when privileged young Ameri-

cans were seasoned socially, traveling to the cultural capitals of Europe in search of the personal enlightenment that was to be found in the museums, villas, and drawing rooms of London, Paris, and Rome. At renowned universities in these and other favored cities, professors delivered valuable knowledge about the universe through lectures or readings.

THE FIRST MASTER NARRATIVE

Learning Through Exposure to the New and Different

Students learn through being exposed to an external, objective, and largely stable world that is the primary agent of learning. The meaning of things is to be found in this external world, and students come to know things about it in two related ways. First, they acquire knowledge through their physical senses—a process, known as "experience," that all humans share. Second, they learn as teachers transfer knowledge about the world to them, in the form of lectures or readings.

When a student encounters new and different ideas, objects, behavior, events, institutions, and so on, he or she takes in fragments of these unfamiliar experiences as they imprint themselves on and are stored in his or her memory.

It is in the nature of things that some human societies are superior to others. Through a process of natural selection, these "civilized" societies, most of them located in Western Europe and North America, have come to dominate less advanced groups. Students acquire desirable social skills as they come into contact with knowledgeable and well-informed people, and they acquire valuable universal knowledge through attending institutions of higher education in these privileged places.

Historical Context for the Second Narrative

Following the Second World War, Margaret Mead and other cultural anthropologists popularized cultural relativity, undermining the assumption that some cultures are superior to others. Confronted with evidence that U.S. diplomats and aid workers sent to live and work abroad were failing to adapt to other cultures on their own, the U.S. government created a predeparture training program within the Foreign Service Institute. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall, one of the founders of intercultural communication and the program's first director, contributed significantly to the development of the "culture contrast" training method. Sverre Lysgaard and Kalervo Oberg popularized a "U-curve" model that described how humans adapted to the psychological stresses of a new environment. Gordon Allport and other social psychologists developed the Contact Hypothesis, identifying social engineering strategies that would reduce discrimination between racially or ethnically different groups.

SECOND MASTER NARRATIVE

Immersion in the New and Different

All cultures are equal, and no single perspective is inherently superior to any other. Each culture's members have over time come to respond uniquely to a common set of human needs and desires.

Humans learn through being exposed to new and different ideas, behavior, objects, events, and

SHUTTERSTOCK/ISTOCKPHOTO

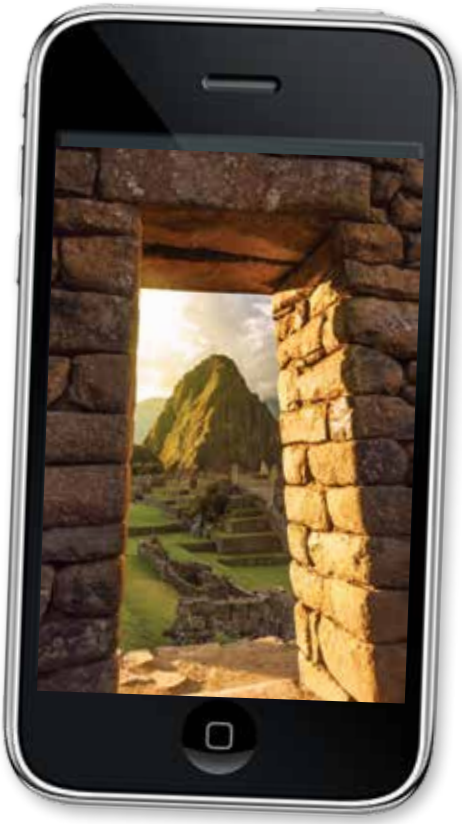
institutions they encounter in the objective and external world. They often find it challenging, though, to deal effectively with the differences they encounter in unfamiliar cultures. When students study abroad, for example, they often move about together in groups, avoiding the sort of engagement with the new and different that normally and naturally leads to learning.

We can increase the likelihood that students will learn by structuring the learning environment, implementing strategies designed to "immerse" them in differences abroad. The most effective strategies include housing them individually with host families, enrolling them in university courses alongside host students, increasing their involvement with host nationals through "buddy" activities, increasing their second language proficiency, and encouraging or requiring them to participate in service learning or other forms of experiential learning.

We know that these immersion strategies are working as intended: When our students return home from studying or working abroad, they frequently report that being abroad has "transformed" them or "changed their lives." We should therefore send as many students abroad as we can.

Historical Context for the Third Narrative

By the close of the twentieth century, research and insights from a wide range of academic disciplines and traditions—anthropology, psychology, linguistics, intercultural communications, experiential and developmental learning theory, critical theory, emotional intelligence, physics, cognitive biology, and neuroscience—are bringing constructivist accounts of learning into prominence. David Kolb and Experiential Learning Theory help bring the terms "experiential," "developmental" and "holistic" into increasingly common usage. Educators in the United States and abroad are developing education abroad courses and programs that are intentionally designed to help learners develop intercultural competence. Milton Bennett's publication of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity and his and Mitchell Hammer's creation of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) provide a developmental model and an empirical instrument that allow educators to guide their intercultural training of learners, and to test the extent to which these interventions are effective.



SHUTTERSTOCK

THIRD NARRATIVE

Immersion, Meaning Making, and Cultural Mentoring

Humans, not the environment, are the principal agents of their own learning. A learner creates, or "constructs," and with other members of his or her several cultural groups co-constructs, the world in the process of perceiving it. Learning does not occur as the environment imprints itself on the mind; it occurs as a continuing series of transactions between the individual and the environment. The meaning of an event is not in the event itself, but in the humans who perceive and act on it.

Learning is experiential and holistic. What a learner "brings" to an event—habitual ways of perceiving and behaving that have been informed by genetic makeup, prior experience, and present needs—determine his or her cognitive, affective, perceptual, and psychomotor capacities and play a fundamental role in shaping his or her experience of what is "out there."

Learning is developmental. When students learn, it is not because the unfamiliar environment somehow imprints itself on their minds but because they come to develop the intercultural competencies that

are needed to shift perspective and adapt behavior to new cultural contexts—acts of shifting and adapting that are cognitive, affective, perceptual, and behavioral.

Thus, while disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning are important, intercultural learning and development are foundational. Among other things, developing intercultural competence allows students to understand, and to experience, some of the ways that new and different teaching and learning norms and practices are grounded in the values and beliefs of the local culture.

Some students come to unfamiliar cultural contexts with the intercultural competence to learn and develop on their own—but most do not. Most learn well in new contexts only when an educator intervenes, teaching them key intercultural concepts and training them to develop foundational intercultural skills.

While it is important, then, that we take steps to "immerse" students in different cultural contexts, we do so in order to give them opportunities to practice and develop basic intercultural competencies: increasing their cultural and personal self-awareness; increasing awareness of others within their own cultural and personal contexts; learning techniques and processes for "bridging cultural gaps"; and learning to identify, manage, communicate, and apply emotions effectively and appropriately.

Disciplinary insights and research evidence now tell us that all too often students abroad are not learning as effectively as we traditionally believed they did. However, they also provide some very good news. Several decades of experimentation with training approaches and our ability to test the effectiveness of these approaches with instruments that rigorous testing has shown to be valid and reliable are allowing us to identify what we can do to improve this situation. As our community increasingly embraces the experiential, developmental, and holistic assumptions of the third paradigm, the number of institutions and organizations that are offering effective intercultural courses and programs continues to grow, and increasing numbers of students are learning and developing abroad in ways that will serve them well following their return to campus, and beyond. **IE**

MICHAEL VANDE BERG, PHD, is principal at MVB Associates, has held leadership positions at CIEE, Georgetown University, Michigan State University, Kalamazoo College, and a number of other institutions unusually dedicated to international education. He is lead editor and author of the 2012 book *Student Learning Abroad: What Our Students are Learning, What They're Not, and What We Can Do About It.*