

Educational “Connections”

Using Technology to Support Students’ Education Abroad Experiences

EDUCATION ABROAD PROFESSIONALS face the daily challenge of making sure students are logistically, academically, and culturally prepared to get the most out of their experience throughout the entire process: before they depart, while they are abroad, and upon their return home. Recent advances in technology have led to the development of online resources that are designed to support students’ learning in all phases: Bruce La Brack’s “What’s Up With Culture?” online cultural training resource (www.uop.edu/sis/culture) and Gary Rhodes’ “PLATO” project (in development, overview at <http://www.globaled.us/plato/about.html>) represent two examples of the gold standard in the field. Online tools are becoming increasingly popular as advisers and administrators realize their potential to add meaningful learning opportunities to a student’s sojourn through a medium that appeals to the “digital natives”¹ who are now attending colleges and universities across the country. These technologies can be adapted for a variety of student and program types and can be developed in such a way that they remain accessible to professionals working with differing levels of financial and staff resources and technological abilities. No matter the type of education abroad provider, technology can be used to engage students and enhance the education abroad experience.

CASE STUDY 1:

The Academic Programs International (API) “Toolbox”

Design and Implementation

API’s *Passport Orientation Handbook*, created to provide students with essential pre-departure information, was first circulated in printed form in 1998. Online services development began in the summer of

2003, and students began using the “Toolbox” system for online orientations and diagnostic language testing in fall 2003 and for online evaluations in spring 2004. The online “Toolbox” complements API’s print resources and is now presented to students as an integral part of their education abroad program; a page highlighting the different components of the system is included in their orientation handbook, and a series of automatic e-mail messages is sent to students alerting them when it is the proper time to log in and access online tools.

EDITOR’S NOTE: *This article discusses how online tools can facilitate and improve education abroad and details experiences at two institutions. These case studies are meant to be examples of how tools developed by these institutions (for exclusive use with their own programs) are used so that other education abroad programs can learn how to develop and implement their own online tools to support and enhance students’ learning abroad.*

Components of the “Toolbox”

The *online orientation* is divided into an introductory section and eight main sections, all designed to encourage students to think about how they can prepare for and learn from their experiences abroad. It begins with a section on “Logistical Preparation.” The “Cultural Preparation” section then introduces students to the concepts of cultural adjustment, culture shock, cultural values and differences, and stereotypes through brief texts, quotes from peers who have studied abroad previously with API, interactive activities (which can be downloaded and completed), and links to external sources (e.g., results of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, surveys from *Maximizing Study Abroad*²). The “Academic Preparation” section gives students details about what to expect in terms of class size, assessment, classroom norms, and library access and provides additional language support materials (e.g., vocabulary cards, writing portfolios). Sections on “Health & Safety” and “Your Host City & Travel” include a variety of links to other Web sites of interest. An in-country section, “Activities for Exploration,”

Diagnostic tests are available to students going to Costa Rica, France, Mexico, and Spain. Students take a pre-test before going abroad to assess which areas of their language skills are open for improvement. Pre-testing helps students place into the appropriate levels once abroad, because any “rustiness” is worked out of their system before the formal on-site placement test. The diagnostic post-test, completed in the final two weeks of the program, shows students how far they progressed during their term abroad. Four versions of the test are randomly assigned to students, each including multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank items testing their understanding of grammar in context. Once students submit answers, they receive a feedback page that indicates which questions were answered incorrectly. These are labeled with the communicative functions as well, so that students know which self-study activities are most appropriate for their needs.

The French and Spanish *self-study activities* are divided into three levels (beginning, intermediate, and advanced) and by communicative function. The seven communicative functions covered are describing, comparing, expressing likes and dislikes, narrating in the past, reacting and recommending, talking about the future, and hypothesizing. These skills are characterized as representative of advanced-level proficiency in the official guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Students attending a program in a French-speaking or Spanish-speaking country are directed to use these self-study activities to work on weak points in their proficiency prior to going abroad.

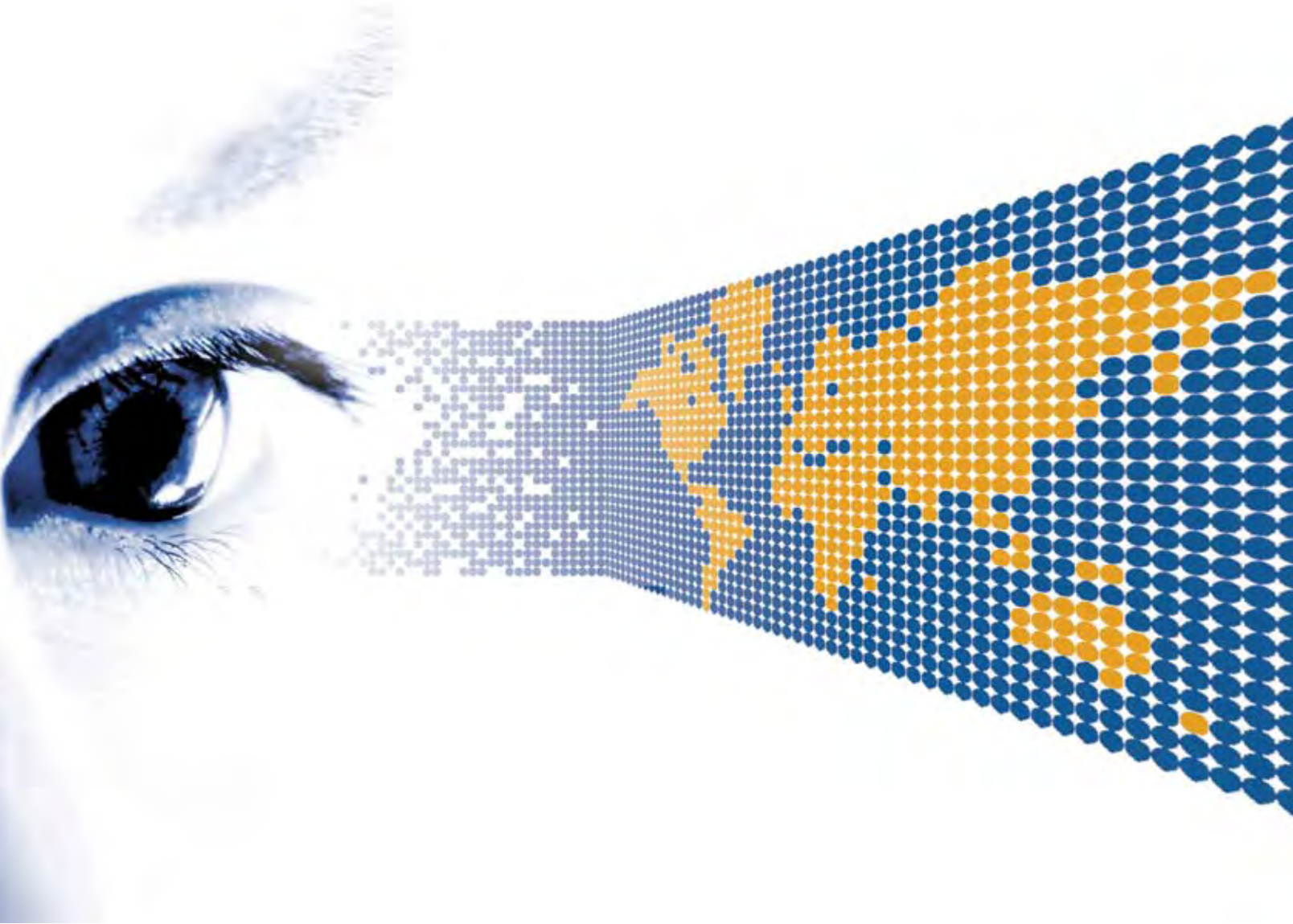
Students can complete their three post-program *evaluations* through the “Toolbox” as well, sharing their feedback and constructive criticism about the API program, academic work abroad, and their housing assignment.

What Next?

API continues to improve and expand the online orientations and language support materials in the “Toolbox,” adding new information each semester. In addition, a series of more targeted “tools” to help students achieve their goals while they are abroad is underway. This project, closely allied with API’s current research study, aims to enhance students’ learning experiences through an honest appraisal of their objectives and a focused effort to develop their skills and knowledge.

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challenges students to deepen their understanding of their host culture via experiential learning exercises. Finally, there is a reentry module with several pages focused on preparing for and processing the return home. Its main sections, “Wrapping it Up...” and “Coming Home,” deal with issues such as saying a culturally appropriate goodbye, readjusting to life in the United States, and integrating new skills and perspectives into future endeavors, and also provide information on scholarships and fellowship opportunities to help students go abroad again. All online orientations incorporate photos and audio clips to add both visual and aural dynamics to the training experience. A sign-off function allows staff to see which orientation pages students have completed in order to track which resources are used most often.



CASE STUDY 2:

The Middlebury Approach

Middlebury College has the luxury and challenge of sending 60 percent of its junior class abroad each year to nearly 100 programs and universities in 40 different countries. Through the implementation of interactive online pre-departure orientations and reflective writing through blogging abroad, Middlebury has utilized technology to support the goal of having students “immerse themselves as fully as possible in the host culture through academic study as well as through direct experience.”³

Middlebury’s Online Pre-Departure Orientation

Like API, Middlebury has incorporated interactive online pre-departure programs for students studying on Middlebury Schools Abroad (including both Middlebury students and students from other colleges and universities who study on Middlebury programs), as well as for Middlebury students directly enrolling

in universities abroad and/or attending other institutions’ programs. For Middlebury students, online pre-departure is intended to complement in-person pre-departure meetings (not replace them); for students from other institutions who participate in the college’s programs, online orientation is an important component in their preparation, as advising of these students is from afar.

Middlebury’s online orientations contain several components:

- online readings covering logistics (e.g., passports, visas, housing, travel), cross-cultural preparation (e.g., culture shock, being an American abroad), and academic preparation (e.g., academic differences abroad, course registration, transfer credit);

- an interactive quiz on the reading that scores on-the-spot; and

- short-answer questions for students (e.g., about their academic and personal goals); answers are automatically e-mailed to the study abroad adviser.

When a student logs in to the orientation program, a notification e-mail is automatically sent to

ONLINE RESOURCES

- **Academic Programs International “Toolbox”:** <http://www.academicintl.com/toolbox> (contact vija@academicintl.com for a guest login)
- **“Blogging the World”:** <http://mt.middlebury.edu/middblogs/ganley/bloggingtheworld/> (note: you must use Mozilla/Firefox as your browser to see the links to student blogs)
- **Cressey, Bill: Students write about study abroad:** http://studyabroad.typepad.com/from_the_desk_of_bill_cre/2006/06/students_write_.html
- **Cressey, Bill: How do we get and share information?** http://studyabroad.typepad.com/from_the_desk_of_bill_cre/2006/06/how_do_we_get_a.html
- **“Culture Matters” Peace Corps online workbook:** <http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/publications/culture/index.cfm>
- **Ganley, Barbara: Blogging as a Dynamic, Transformative Medium in an American Liberal Arts Classroom:** <http://mt.middlebury.edu/middblogs/ganley/bgblogging/002796.html>.
- **La Brack, Bruce: “What’s Up With Culture?”:** www.uop.edu/sis/culture
- **Middlebury School in Latin America Cuaderno Blog:** <http://mt.middlebury.edu/middblogs/hvila/cuaderno/>
- **Middlebury College On-Line Pre-Departure (non-Middlebury programs abroad):** <http://segue.middlebury.edu/index.php?action=site&site=ocst0000a-f04>
- **NAFSA 2006 Annual Conference Sessions: Technology & Study Abroad: Accomplishing the Mission Reflective Writing: Getting Students to Go Beyond the Journal To purchase audio recordings of conference sessions:** <http://www.softconference.com/060521>
- **Rhodes, Gary: “PLATO” project:** <http://www.globaled.us/plato/about.html>
- **Siemens, George: Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age:** www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm; <http://www.connectivism.ca/about.html>

Blogging Abroad

Many programs have incorporated blogging into the education abroad experience, taking advantage of it as a marketing tool as well as an educational tool. Middlebury advisers have attempted to bring students’ already existing interest in the blogosphere into academe in order to deepen the education abroad experience. As such, Middlebury emphasizes reflective blogging about the education abroad experience, as opposed to online diaries for students’ friends and family to follow their adventures.

Middlebury Professor Barbara Ganley has developed a groundbreaking project in conjunction with Dickinson and Haverford Colleges entitled *Blogging the World*.⁴ *Blogging the World*, which incorporates individual students’ blogs with a collaborative blog, is designed to address questions about how blogging can create opportunities for effective reflection on and contextualization of the education abroad experience. The very public nature of blogging has established a readership of Middlebury students’ blogs from all corners of the globe. Readers comment on students’ writing, ask probing questions, and stimulate discussion, all of which encourages students to reflect more deeply and think more analytically.

The Middlebury Schools Abroad in Latin America and Spain have incorporated in-language blogging into seminars and have also found blogging to be an effective tool for reflective writing. Not only has blogging improved students’ writing in Spanish (or Portuguese in Brazil), but having native speakers and people from the host countries among the readership has fostered cross-cultural learning in ways no one predicted.

Each semester increasing numbers of students are blogging and using social software and digital storytelling technology. At Middlebury, education abroad advisers and professors have seen that integrating computers, digital cameras, iPods, and other electronic devices into the academic experience encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and become

the education abroad adviser, so student participation can be easily tracked.

Half of Middlebury’s education abroad students directly enroll in institutions abroad or study on other providers’ programs, all of which have varying styles and lengths of orientations on-site; therefore, advisers at the college feel an ethical responsibility to provide a comprehensive overview of what students need to know prior to departure. Education advisers at Middlebury also aim to motivate them to recognize what they do *not* know, which hopefully gives them the tools they need to do their homework prior to studying abroad. To this end, the online orientation for students who study abroad

with non-Middlebury programs is “culture-general,” and the in-person meetings are presented by country/region to provide “culture-specific” preparation. The adviser incorporates the online student responses into the in-person orientation meetings in lectures and discussions, helping students to see the relevance of the online information.

Student feedback indicates that online orientations are successful, and students report the combination of online and in-person orientations facilitate their preparedness to immerse fully in their host cultures and get the most out of their education abroad experience.



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creative, out-of-the-box thinkers. In fact, capitalizing on these “connections” helps students integrate classroom and out-of-class experiences studying abroad into their whole lives, rather than seeing education abroad as an isolated experience.

Further Benefits of Technology

Online tools offer clear advantages that can make them a worthwhile investment for your institution given their numerous capabilities:

Enable the institution to reach a large audience without direct contact.

Deliver both basic and in-depth information to students.

Provide multiple levels of training for students with different needs and interests.

Make use of multiple modes of communication.

Aid in the immersion process and facilitate the integration of the study abroad experience into students’ education as a whole.

Incorporating technology into student training and preparation also addresses some key points that Bruce La Brack discussed at his session “Integrating Internet Resources into Study Abroad” at the 2005 NAFSA national conference, specifically the primary characteristics of “Just-in-Time” (JIT) training:

Enables the learner: they are making them take responsibility for self-directed learning.

Does it at their pace: resources are available 24/7, with no time limits.

Considers both ‘portability’ and specificity: both culture-general and culture-specific materials are included.

Delivers it at the right time: the system can be designed to make content available with the learner’s stage of transition in mind.

Emphasizes learner readiness: appropriate support can be provided in “teachable moments.”

In Summary

This article outlined two institutions’ approaches to using technology to support

the education abroad experience. While the initial commitment of time and resources needed to implement new technology can be daunting, the investment is not only worthwhile, but is in fact advisable as we, as part of the community of education abroad advisers, seek to educate this generation of digital natives. **IE**

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Endnotes

¹ Marc Prensky coined the terms “digital native” and “digital immigrant” in a 2001 article featured in *On the Horizon* (NCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001), where he described the “new” students of today, whose ways of taking in and processing information vary greatly from the rest of population due to their lifelong familiarity with and preference for different technologies and devices as channels of input.

² Paige, R.M., Cohen, A.D., Kappler, B., Chi, J., & Lassegard, J. (2002). *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Students’ Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use*. Minneapolis: Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, University of Minnesota.

³ Middlebury College web page: www.middlebury.edu/about/.

⁴ *Blogging the World* can be found at: <http://mt.middlebury.edu/middblogs/ganley/bloggingtheworld/>; note that you must use Mozilla/Firefox as your browser to see the links to student blogs. Professor Ganley has written extensively on bringing blogging into the classroom; see: *Blogging as a Dynamic, Transformative Medium in an American Liberal Arts Classroom* (<http://mt.middlebury.edu/middblogs/ganley/bgblogging/002796.html>).