

The Ideal Study Abroad Text

Gordon, Robert. 2010. *Going Abroad: How to Travel Like an Anthropologist*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Lantis, Jeffrey S. and Jessica DuPlaga. 2010. *The Global Classroom: An Essential Guide to Study Abroad*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Madison Graham, Carol. 2011. *Coping with Anti-Americanism: A Guide to Getting the Most Out of Studying Abroad*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books.

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What is the ideal book to prepare students to study abroad? This is a question that those involved in preparing students for the study abroad experience face on a regular basis. In my mind the ideal readings for study abroad would include some discussion of intercultural communication and some information on the local culture. A lot has been written about intercultural communication, of course, especially in anthropology literature, and so finding readings on this subject is not hard. Likewise one has a several options for texts on local culture. One could assign history books, travel books, or cultural-survey books like *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong: Why We Love France but Not the French* by Jean-Benoit Nadeau and Julie Barlow, or *The AngloFiles: A Field Guide to the British* by Sarah Lyall. However, the common experiences and feelings that students are likely to face while abroad are not going to be covered in either a book on a local culture or in a text on intercultural communication. Consequently, in the last ten to twenty years or so, as study abroad has grown on American campuses, a new genre of book, the “study abroad text,” has been created. These books often touch on intercultural communication theories and may provide some discussion on local cultures, but their primary intent is to discuss study abroad from the point of view of the student.

In this short essay I look at three books in this genre—*The Global Classroom* by Jeffrey S. Lantis and Jessica DuPlaga; *Going Abroad: Traveling Like an Anthropologist* by Robert Gordon; and *Coping with Anti-Americanism: A Guide to Getting the Most Out of Studying Abroad* by Carol Madison Graham. Each approaches the subject a bit differently and by looking at them together one gets a good idea of the challenges one faces in finding the ideal study abroad text.

The first book, *The Global Classroom* by Lantis and DuPlaga, states in its preface that its intent is to prepare students for “meaningful study abroad.” It does this by looking at the issues students are likely to face from the time they first consider studying abroad to the time they return home. It covers all this in a concise (just over 100 pages) overview. This brevity can be a strength if one is considering assigning it to busy students, but at times I found myself wishing that there was a bit more information on some of the topics it covers. For most students, chapters 3, 4, and 5 are going to be the most useful parts of the book. These deal with preparing to study abroad, making the most of the experience while abroad, and reorientation on return. There is little attention paid to specific regional issues, as might be expected in a book giving a general overview, but there is a discussion of intercultural communication. The first two chapters—those dealing with deciding whether or not to study abroad and choosing the best program—likewise

cover all relevant issues, but these are not going to be particularly useful for a student who has already chosen a study abroad program.

Because this book is so short, it could easily be combined with culture-specific readings to round out a preparation course. It could also be used to train new study abroad advisers since it gives a good overview of the issues involved in all steps in the study abroad experience. And, it is subject neutral so would be appropriate for a class of students from a variety of majors.

By contrast, one will not find a subject-neutral approach to studying abroad in *Going Abroad: Traveling Like an Anthropologist*. Having spent a career doing field anthropology, Robert Gordon is an unapologetic advocate for the anthropological approach to studying abroad. The first five chapters of the book, in fact, are spent on an anthropological analysis of travel and living abroad. For students and faculty who are trained in anthropological methods this discussion could be very enriching, but it might have limited appeal to those in other disciplines.

The second part of the book, however, where Gordon talks about the nitty-gritty of travel is likely to have a broader appeal. Much of the information he presents in this portion is enlightening and entertaining. As might be expected in an anthropology text, it has very good information on intercultural communication and on learning a local culture. It is also very good at discussing the mundane issues (food, sanitation, communication) students will face living in the developing world. But, because of this focus on the developing world, a student headed to Western Europe or the major cities of East Asia who reads this book would have to wade through a lot of information that would not be relevant to their study abroad experience.

Where Lantis and DuPlaga take an overview approach and Gordon takes a discipline-specific approach to studying abroad, the final book, *Coping with Anti-Americanism* by Carol Graham approaches the subject from a single topic—namely, the issue of anti-Americanism. To me, anti-Americanism conjures images of rock-throwing mobs chanting “Yankee Go Home.” And since American students are highly unlikely to face such mobs while abroad, it seemed a stretch to me for there to be an entire book on the subject. However, as the author makes clear from the beginning, she is not focusing solely or even primarily on the “Yankee Go Home” forms of anti-Americanism. Rather, she defines anti-Americanism as any situation where non-Americans criticize or misunderstand America, its people, or its institutions.

Defining anti-Americanism this broadly gives Graham a basis on which to discuss a number of issues that are often misunderstood by non-Americans. These include racial diversity and conflict, the role of religion in American society, regionalism in the United States, and America’s education system. She makes the point that even though American films and TV programs are well-known worldwide, the ignorance that non-Americans have of American culture oftentimes matches the ignorance Americans have of foreign cultures. The focus of this book is to prepare students to more effectively deal with the incorrect views of America that they are likely to face, and having spent time overseas as a student and as a diplomat, Graham has first-hand experience in correcting these misunderstandings.

If I were asked to recommend a book to students who were likely to have deep interactions with the locals while on study abroad, I would certainly consider this one. It would be particularly useful for students going to the United Kingdom or Turkey, where Graham spent a large amount of time and whose cultures she frequently references. But the information is general enough that it could be used for students going to other destinations, and Graham adds a number of short stories from students and academics who have studied in other parts of the world to give the book a broader scope. The book would be of much less value, though, to students whose only interaction with the local culture is to ask “how much does this cost?”

And so what is the best book for a group of study abroad students? The true, though unsatisfying, answer is that it depends. Study abroad programs have different goals and structures, students have different amounts of time in which to prepare, and faculty directors have different expectations. Added to this, one must balance the need for general information on studying abroad with specific information on intercultural communications and the local culture. While I would argue that information in all of these areas would be useful for students going abroad, there could easily be cases where intercultural communication or even the discussion of local culture would not be that helpful. I am thinking of an art program, for instance, that travels from city to city looking at great art and has less interaction with locals than in other programs. In a case like this, the limited preparation time might be better spent learning about art rather than local cultures (or at least the interaction between art and culture).

With this in mind, and if we only had these three books to choose from, my recommendation would be as follows: If one is looking for a general overview of the student experience in studying abroad then the Lantis/DuPlaga book is a good choice though one would probably want to couple this with readings on the specific culture of the study abroad location. If someone is interested in traveling as an anthropologist or to the developing world, then I would recommend the Gordon book. And finally, if one is dealing with students who will spend a lot of time interacting with locals, I would recommend Graham's book. Each of these books is well-written and quick reads, and there is value in each; but as might be expected, none of them will fit ideally for all study abroad programs.