

The View from the Veranda: Understanding Today's Colonial Student

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Introduction

And so it was, for decade after decade, a steady stream of colonial families traveled great distances to join the ranks of countless others to take up residency in their country's dominions abroad. In many ways their personal motives were similar. Whether it was to make money, to find excitement, to improve their status, or to maintain family tradition, colonials found themselves on journeys to worlds very different from what they knew. Usually by steamship, their transition from a land of the familiar to a land full of new sounds, sights, and smells was more than a mere trip, a rite of passage.

It was undoubtedly a strenuous but highly interesting life. Numerically few on the ground, colonial families in the British realm, for example, often assumed great responsibilities and administered vast territories. Although the work was demanding, difficult, and at times dangerous, many colonials were thought to be living lives of leisure — being waited on by servants, spending time in posh clubs, attending formal balls, and so forth (de Caro, 1996). Colonials generally occupied large bungalows or compounds and commonly employed numerous servants to run the household. The colonials, especially wives with no official work, possibly no children at home, and only a staff of servants with whom to interact, might have felt very isolated. By the very fact that the colonials were by definition a ruling elite, the nature of relations between the colonials and the local population were often ceremonial and prescribed. Assuredly, some assimilated to local ways of life and even intermarried with the native people (de Caro, 1996). Some learned to speak local languages and might have interacted exclusively with the native community for weeks or months at a time. For the most part, however, the colonials maintained their distance, interacting only as needed and often in an objective and disassociated manner.

In the early 1920s, a new generation of foreigners began to move onto the scene for whom sitting passively on the bungalow veranda observing the local culture going by was no longer sufficient. For pioneering anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski and Ruth Benedict, it was important to step down from the colonial veranda to live and learn directly from the native people in an effort to describe and to understand another way

of life from the native point of view. It was important for them to put aside their own predetermined classification systems and notions of the world, if only briefly, “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (Malinowski, 1922). They sought to describe interactions within social settings, the outcome of these interactions and how the native people understood what they were doing and the meaning the interactions had for them. Whether doing fieldwork in Polynesia or Melanesia, the Canadian Arctic islands or the Japanese archipelago, these pioneering scholars were different; they were somehow motivated to want to get off the venerable veranda and to learn directly with and from the natives.

Consider international education and student mobility today. Recent decades have seen unprecedented growth in the number of U.S. students studying abroad for academic credit and an expansion of the field in such a way as to allow students to study virtually any subject in any part of the world and for any length of time. As we welcome continuous growth and development of education abroad, our challenge will be to preserve our fundamental mission to engage students in meaningful intellectual and intercultural experiences without falling back on a colonial discourse that is concerned with elitism and consumption. To be sure, the profession is facing unrelenting pressure to accommodate increasing demand for familiar amenities and modern conveniences. Providing programming that responds to student and industry demands however should not be at the expense of allowing students to remain within the comfortable environs of the veranda while observing their host community from a safe and unchallenging distance. Understanding the nature of today’s student is essential if we are to recognize what prevents them from and what motivates them to want to step off the veranda.

This article will seek to reexamine the student experience in education abroad today by employing an analogy derived from a post-colonial paradigm, thus describing contemporary students as *colonial students*. Moreover, the extent to which the profession of education abroad is complicit in developing and perpetuating a *colonial system* will be demonstrated. Issues involved in the degree to which students are motivated toward pursuing meaningful intercultural learning and engagement will be presented and discussed in the context of working effectively with colonial students.

The Colonial Student

Within U.S. higher education today, it has become commonplace to refer to our students as customers. Incoming students want personal attention, a seamless administrative system, specialized housing and food service options, easy access

to the Internet, their own bathrooms, microwaves in their rooms, and intense counseling support, to name just a few amenities and services. As customers, they want top-notch recreational facilities, smaller classes, and what seems like on-demand contact with counselors, advisers, faculty, and administrators. Not responding to these high-level expectations can have serious consequences for an institution, notably in areas of competitiveness, enrollment management, student retention, resources management, athletics, alumni giving, etc.

Education abroad has not been immune to the pervasive consumerism mentality seen in U.S. higher education. Without hesitation, students (and their parents) are increasingly demanding familiar amenities and modern conveniences while abroad and seemingly with total disregard to host cultural norms or feasibility. Education abroad is responding to these exciting, yet troubling new challenges. For example, education abroad programs are rapidly expanding academic offerings abroad, making it possible for students to take courses offered within even the most specialized of disciplines. Student accommodation is similarly diversifying, now offering luxury apartments in addition to the norm of living with local host families or in student residence halls. As interest in full-year immersion programs wane, education abroad is responding by offering attractive topic-oriented programs, usually eight weeks or less in duration and often under the tutelage of a professor from the home institution (IIE, 2005). Indeed, the typical student is noticeably changing and because of this it is more challenging to sustain a reasonable balance between meeting students' expectations and industry standards on the one hand and offering affordable programs that actively and creatively engage students in meaningful intellectual and intercultural learning on the other.

Not surprisingly, a distinct type of education abroad student appears to be emerging within this dynamic environment. This profile, the *colonial student*, typifies the U.S. university student who really wants to be abroad and take full advantage of all the benefits studying abroad offers, but is not necessarily open to experiencing the less desirable side of being there. The colonial student casts a striking likeness with the early colonial travelers, who also moved across borders within the confines of a political and bureaucratic system of established protocols and practices. Colonial students yearn to be abroad, to travel to worlds different from their own, to find excitement, to see new wonders and to have experiences of a lifetime. They want to gain new perspectives on world affairs, develop practical skills and build their resumes for potential career enhancement, all the while receiving full academic credit. Like children of the empire, colonial students have a sense of entitlement, as if the world is

theirs for discovery, if not for the taking. New cultures are experienced in just the same way as new commodities are coveted, purchased and owned.

In keeping with national trends, colonial students are more likely to study in English-language based programs in Western Europe, Australia or New Zealand. As these students are less apt to participate in longer or full immersion programs, they seldom identify with or feel a sense of belonging to their host community. Although they may have been initially drawn to a particular destination when choosing where to study, the place comes to largely serve as a home base from which students make frequent sightseeing forays into other parts of the country or region. Rather than immerse themselves into the host community to the extent possible, they embrace the privileges afforded to them as short-term guests. Learning the local language, developing meaningful relationships within the community or exploring the uniqueness of the host culture all become relatively less important. Colonial students are less interested in living with local host families, choosing rather to stay in shared apartments with other students. Some are willing to live with local families but only if at least one other student is placed in the home. Colonial students have money and do not mind spending it, as long as they can carry the home-grown “bubble” of their lifestyle around with them.

Colonial students are interested in socializing with their local peers; however, these interactions are typically on their own terms and mostly because the students are ill equipped with the social skills necessary to break away and form relationships within the host culture. Oblivious to differing cultural patterns of socialization or faced with language barriers too trying to overcome, colonial students find themselves falling back on the relative ease and security of the “student bubble.” As a result, students are more likely to develop friendships within their student cohort. Those that do develop friendships within the community, often do so through engineered social experiences, such as the Spanish *intercambio*, the Italian *Spazio Conversazione*, conversation exchange partnerships, ePal programs, homestay experiences, etc.

Colonial students are in the same way likely to stay close to home base when it comes to their academic choices. Although education abroad programs are expanding enrollment possibilities, most notably by developing strategic partnerships with various local institutions, colonial students are drawn primarily to classes that are taught in English and usually offered exclusively for U.S. students abroad. The culture of these courses is more familiar to them, with US-style inflationary grading, discussion-based classes and with content tailored for an American audience. Taking courses on a pass/fail basis is

growing in popularity with colonial students. When direct enrollment options in classes with local students are offered, or even when they are central to the curriculum, colonial students tend to group themselves around particular courses taught by professors that are reputedly “American friendly.”

All in all, colonial students are comfortably situated on the venerable veranda, although with an obstructed view of the full potential that an education abroad experience presents. The colonial student does his/her experiencing from the veranda and ventures away only occasionally, and then only into well-charted territory. Rather than developing still more cultural activities and programming that target only the most ready and enthusiastic students, effectively luring colonial students off the veranda will require that the education abroad experience capture whatever it was that motivated the early ethnographers to want to step down from the veranda and to engage in meaningful ways with the local culture. The education abroad field will need to discover what motivates students to want to step outside of their comfort zones in spite of perceptions of risk. What makes education abroad a truly transformative experience for these students will be found in their ability and willingness to engage the unknown and for international educators to remain as equally open and receptive to new learning pedagogies.

The Colonial System

U.S. higher education is concerned with preparing students to become productive citizens of a dynamic, ever-changing world. As educators, our role is to invigorate students to higher expectations of themselves so that they assume the role of active seeker of new knowledge and experience. Students who are not sufficiently inspired or challenged to achieve success may only passively absorb that which is presented to them. Their view of self-confidence is that it arises not from removing hurdles such as grading, but by knowing they can jump over these hurdles. The challenge to educators is to determine what knowledge should be taught, what experience is most needed, and how to prepare students to be open and receptive to new learning. Providing meaningful, educative learning opportunities is the fundamental premise that we, as educators, must exalt and upon which our institutions must stand.

In developing and delivering education abroad programs, we face an ongoing struggle to balance our parallel roles as conscientious educators and competent administrators. As administrators, we are centrally involved in all aspects of program design, development, implementation and evaluation. We are responsible for developing high quality programs that are flexible and

responsive to student needs while also ensuring that they are appealing, accessible, and academically challenging. As educators, we are deeply committed to international education and intercultural learning and work tirelessly to provide meaningful and educative experiences for our students. The presence of the colonial student mentality must neither disrupt this balance nor lead us down a path in which we complicity or unwitting aid in the creation of a *colonial system* — an education abroad infrastructure that essentially perpetuates a *colonial student gaze*, borrowing from John Urry's postmodern notion of the "tourist gaze" (Urry, 2002).

Historically, the practice of colonialism involved the transfer of people to new territories where they lived for extended periods of time while maintaining allegiance to their home country (Memmi, 1965). If an analogy could thus be drawn with education abroad, a colonial system might be described as the infrastructure which supports the privileged position of the student over the local. If we are merely transposing to foreign soils an American bubble of U.S. higher education concerned mostly with access, consumption, and personal gain, we may be doing little more than establishing a colonial-like presence in what appears to be our "country's dominions abroad." Consider three key areas of education abroad programming where such a system appears to have already begun to unfold: program development, student services, and community integration.

With anticipated growth in U.S. education abroad, overseas program development is occurring at a staggering rate. Many new and original initiatives are being pursued by third party or consortium-based organizations and U.S. institutions are developing short-term, faculty-led programs as well as their own study centers with the anticipation of enrolling external students. Partner institutions abroad are similarly offering new programs designed for short-term, education abroad students and doubling their recruitment efforts. With so many new and exciting initiatives being launched, why is the field still befuddled with issues of intercultural integration? Topics covered at most education abroad conferences inevitably include to some degree discussions of cultural immersion, host community integration, notions of reciprocity and the list goes on. The inherent irony is simple: we build education abroad programs based primarily on U.S. student demand and then secondarily concern ourselves with issues of intercultural integration. For example, our students often find themselves on empty campuses because the U.S. academic calendar takes precedence in designing new programs. Because of student demand for shared apartments, sometimes up to five U.S. students are permitted to live

together. Or, students are housed in international student-only dormitories that are not subject to the same curfews or rules as local student residences. Academic schedules sometimes avoid Friday class meetings to allow students three-day travel weekends. Essentially, when designing programs with such flexibility we are in essence building a colonial compound and deliberately placing our students on the veranda. Once they're comfortably settled, we seem perplexed as to why they are not engaging more within the local community.

Student services that focus on cultural engagement within education abroad programming take many forms and are often as enjoyable as they are beneficial. Creative programming may very well jump-start the cultural integration challenge of meeting local people. However, some standard approaches toward providing student services may actually work counter to our desired objectives. For example, most programs now regularly conduct pre-departure and/or on-site welcome orientation sessions. Although these sessions take many forms, most are designed to provide a program overview and introduce students to the local community. Inevitably this is also a time for community building and student bonding within the confines of the program. While there are certainly many desirable outcomes of this, the creation of a student cohort or student bubble makes it exceptionally difficult for even the most determined student to later step outside its boundaries without social repercussions. Orientation sessions that model appropriate local community engagement early on may likely be better serving its students, because community building within the student cohort occurs naturally throughout the course of the program.

To encourage local integration, student service professionals develop alluring and creative student activities; however, to a great extent these experiences may be socially engineered or contrived. For example, recruiting (frequently for pay) local residents as conversation partners may amplify feelings of awkwardness the students have toward interacting socially on their own and implicitly perpetuate the notion that the local culture can be socially manipulated or commoditized for their privilege. Seemingly a positive service, responding to student demand to expand in-house computer facilities likely ensures that the students maintain close proximity to the student bubble and is actually counter-intuitive given the increasing availability of wireless facilities and Internet cafes in most locations where students study. This, in turn, fosters closer contact with home and further increases the sense of isolation from the host culture. Moreover, when there are study centers available for students, these facilities are increasingly off-limits to the local student population out of concern for privacy and security. The message being communicated to the host

community is... as long as the natives stay outside of the compound all will be peaceful and safe.

Next, providing meaningful community integration is very often a stated objective of education abroad programming. Delivering on this objective is increasingly difficult as programming design and student engagement activities may actually shield or widen the buffer zone of student contact with the host culture. For example, homestay placements are often lauded as a model of authentic cultural contact and immersion. What is frequently not mentioned is the developing trend (especially in Western Europe) toward placing two or more students with one family. Doing so potentially fosters the formation of a “shadow culture” or third culture within the homestay (Citron, 2002), and thus further encapsulates the students from cultural contact that might otherwise shake them beyond their comfort zones. In much the same way, hiring local students to work as resident assistants (R.A.s) in student apartments may do very little if the dominant U.S., English-speaking culture overwhelms the otherwise good intentions of the R.A., thus achieving little more than having an in-house, cultural informant.

Incorporating student field trips is another admirable attempt at intercultural integration but all too often does very little to foster notions of reciprocity with the local community. Field trips are drifting further and further away from the main tourist destinations to include more remote and exotic locales, purportedly offering more “authentic” examples of the traditional culture. And while that is certainly arguable, these adventurous forays may actually differ little in the end. Being guided *en masse* to a major tourist destination or stepping down from an air-conditioned bus to see a quaint, medieval village remains still very much a voyeuristic, framed experience with limited or no meaningful intercultural exchange. The students are being told where to go, how long to go for, where to eat, how long to visit the toilet, and so on. The connection with the culture remains filtered through sunglasses and a camera viewfinder.

As international educators, our responsibilities lie not only in providing the highest quality programming for our students, but also in understanding the impact our presence has within our host communities. To ignore the fundamental principle that we are equally indebted to and reliant on our host communities for realizing the goals of our programming would be to undermine our basic aspirations to encourage meaningful intellectual and intercultural exchange. Rather than positioning ourselves as contributing members of the host community and embedding our educational endeavors within the community consciousness, education abroad activities tend to linger on the economic

and cultural periphery of our host communities. Although there has been a much-welcomed political shift toward employing native faculty and staff on-site, or at least those who are acculturated, there still remains the transparent acquiescence to American standards of programming, often at the expense of host culture standards of quality. In a sense, we hire for diversity of perspective and background but insist on socialization for similarity. For instance, local faculty are hired for their expertise but are subsequently trained to design and deliver courses that adhere to a US-style course syllabus that often requires uncomfortable faculty members to calculate grades based on class participation, attendance and any number of assessment activities, including mid-term exams, final papers, reflection journals, etc. Traditional models of independent learning are discarded for more American-centric pedagogies of dependent learning. In much the same way, homestay families are publicly sought for the family support and nurturing they provide, but are often regulated to be more like paid landlords, requiring they provide a room with certain provisions and at least two meals each day.

By hovering on the economic and cultural periphery of our host communities, we are in effect transposing a microcosm of American management and administration. And while we certainly espouse respect for the people, places and cultures that host us, our approaches are not always leading to the development of true reciprocity in which the local community is central to our viability and benefactors of our success. The basic tenets of Social Exchange Theory would suggest that our host communities are more likely to participate fully in such exchanges if they believe that they will enjoy benefits without incurring unacceptable costs (Gursoy and Rutherford, 2004). If the local community perceives the benefits of hosting international students, for example, they are inclined to be involved in the exchange and thus endorse future integration within their community” (Allen, Hafer, Long and Perdue, 1993). Simply, the sustainability of most education abroad programming lies in the ability to provide opportunities for our students and those in the host culture to live and learn alongside people from different cultures. By imposing an American-ethnocentric, colonial system on the backs of our host communities and then to concern ourselves with issues of intercultural integration does little more than perpetuate notions of our own elitism, power and domination.

Working with the Colonial Student

It is widely accepted that an education abroad experience can have a considerable impact upon a student, potentially truly transformative intercultural and intellectually. As discussed earlier, the impact on the host community

is often more subtle, but can sometimes be considerable as well. Given the complexity unfolding within the field of education abroad and the emergence of the colonial student, various new questions are arising that cannot easily be dismissed. For example, to what extent does the colonial student enter a liminal state while abroad in which appropriate standards of acceptable behavior are relaxed, propelling the student into an apparent behavioral free-for-all? To what extent does the colonial student seek authenticity in cultural experiences and how does the colonial system enable or hinder this? This section will address such nuances involved in the degree to which students are motivated toward pursuing meaningful intercultural learning and engagement. Constraints that limit this engagement and issues related to perceptions of risk will also be discussed. Finally, negotiating accessibility and the pursuit of cultural authenticity (or lack thereof) will be explored from a post-modern perspective.

Though difference and strangeness are essential elements in most any intercultural experience, not even the most adventurous student is completely ready to immerse him/herself wholly into the host culture. Adjusting to a new culture can be experienced as unpleasant, even threatening to some students. When the experiences are overly challenging, students may retreat to the colonial veranda and close themselves off to future encounters with cultural difference (Citron, 2001). Most students seem to need something familiar around them, something to remind them of home, whether it is familiar food, access to the Internet, music and television, housing amenities or other students similarly reacting to the new culture. Students are likely better able to enjoy the experience of change and novelty only from a strong base of familiarity, which enables them to feel secure enough to enjoy the strangeness of what they are experiencing. Referencing levels of tourism engagement, Erik Cohen (1972) states “they would like to experience the novelty of the macro-environment of a strange place from the security of a familiar environment.” With this in mind, it is reasonable to understand how colonial students are drawn to programs that provide them with familiar amenities and the comforts of home. Students are therefore not so much abandoning the familiar comfort zone as they are transposing it abroad. To a certain extent, the colonial student is more at ease observing the people, places and culture from protective boundaries without actually experiencing any discomfort. Like Cohen’s tourist, the experience of the colonial student combines a degree of novelty with a degree of familiarity, “the security of old habits with the excitement of change” (Cohen, 1972).

The extent to which a student experiences this mostly depends upon the individual’s openness to the unknown and willingness to engage with difference.

Cohen (1972) suggests that there is a continuum of possible combinations of novelty and familiarity, from the least adventurous traveler who is largely confined to the familiar bubble to the most adventurous who largely shuns established programming and for whom the need for familiarity disappears almost completely. In much the same way, Bennett's developmental model on reaction to cultural difference supports this idea (Bennett, 1993). By examining this phenomenon more closely, however, one could conclude that developing still more student-focused activities may do little to motivate students to want to step off the veranda because the packaging of these experiences in effect allows them to take the familiarity of the veranda with them. What is critical here to acknowledge is that students are likely best served when they are enabled or empowered to want to step outside of their comfort zones or to want to move toward greater areas of novelty.

Equipping students with the social skills necessary to break away and form relationships within the host culture may be a more effective approach. As colonial students do not anticipate encountering intercultural difficulty, they are less prepared to handle feelings associated with cultural adjustment. Because they have been told (usually by other students) that this will be an ideal, "totally amazing" experience, they are thrown off guard when they encounter difficulty, leading either to internal self-doubt and uncertainty or external judgment and evaluation (usually negative) of the host culture. For example, the value placed upon friendship and interpersonal relationships varies across cultures. In his pioneering work, *Public and Private Self in Japan and the United States*, Dean Barnlund (1975) examined the interactions and patterns of communication among Japanese and U.S. American university students. His research highlighted how the choice of topics and subject areas influenced the interactions between the two cultures, emphasizing what may be appropriate with one culture may be intrusive and proscribed for the other. By understanding friendship norms and acceptable patterns of socialization, students are better equipped to pursue culturally appropriate strategies for developing meaningful relationships within the host culture. Through on-going orientation sessions, for example, students can be encouraged to reflect on the acceptable patterns of socialization and interpersonal relationship building within the host culture. Oblivious to such subjective cultural differences, students may otherwise find themselves retreating back to the veranda, unmotivated and deflated.

Even Cohen's most adventurous traveler encounters barriers or constraints when trying to engage directly with the new culture (Cohen, 1972). In addition to the constrictions imposed by the education abroad program structure discussed earlier, students must frequently overcome an array of personal constraints,

such as inadequate language skills, time limitations, race and gender expectations and so on. Not knowing the language, for example, makes forming acquaintances and traveling on one's own so difficult that some students make only small attempts. Even worse, the absence of any genuine connection leaves the students without a real feeling for the culture or people. With nearly 50% of all students now studying abroad on programs of less than eight weeks in duration (IIE, 2005), there is simply less opportunity for unstructured and sustained engagement outside of the program. As culturally-based expectations of race and gender vary, usually loaded with stereotypes and false attributions, male and female students soon realize that they have different inroads of cultural accessibility. Students who are visible outsiders of the host culture may encounter differing degrees of acceptance, from exceptional privilege to outright discrimination. For example, a mono-lingual Asian-American studying in Japan may initially be expected to speak Japanese based on appearance and a bi-lingual European-American student may find few locals comfortable using the language with him/her. The Asian-American student may be considered rude or ignorant when not responding appropriately and the European-American, regardless of true linguistic skills and ability, may always be treated as a newly-arrived tourist.

More important to this discussion on the constraints to intercultural engagement, however, is the degree to which students are ready or mature enough for the international experience. Education abroad students trying to live and study in cultures other than their own are hopefully challenged to understand and cope successfully with difference. When students are challenged slightly beyond their comfort zones and are not panicked, the results can be transformative. However, faced with too much complexity too soon, they may fall back on superficial or stereotypical interpretations, dismiss or demean the "other" as irrelevant or insignificant, or defer to authorities who tell them what to think (Jurasek, 1995). For this reason, it is important that students are supported in making informed decisions about where, what and when they want to study abroad. For example, a student with a low tolerance for ambiguity, or one who becomes overly anxious in unscripted or ambiguous situations, is likely ill-suited for semi-structured, experiential learning programs (Gundykunst, 1991). A student that demonstrates cognitive flexibility or is open to new information and multiple perspectives may be ideally suited for international internship experiences (Gundykunst, 1991). In general, if a student's skills, knowledge and attitude equate with evident challenges, then it is far more likely he/she will be motivated to pursue intercultural learning and less deterred by perceived risk.

It is important to add here that individual students approach new intercultural experiences according to their perception of the risks involved, and that which is perceived as risky or undesirable mostly depends on their values and preferences (Renn, 1992). With greater familiarity with the cultural context, students are better able to calibrate their individual judgments and proceed well informed. The unfortunate irony inherent in education abroad is that instead of dispelling myths or false perceptions of risk, we may actually be perpetuating them. As the field becomes more institutionalized and standardized, the stronger the barrier between the student and the host culture becomes. The heightened litigiousness of U.S. society and the corresponding emphasis on risk management by education abroad professionals appears to be having an adverse impact on cultural programming. For example, when program leaders are instructed to make special group travel arrangements rather than use public transportation or to avoid culturally appropriate activities that expose students to alcohol consumption, all with the rationale of reducing institutional liability, we do in fact protect our institutions but regrettably send an implicit message of warning to our students. Individuals learn to perceive the world through perceptual lenses that are filtered by their own social and cultural backgrounds, and as such education abroad's insistence on minimizing risk may be exacerbating their reluctance to engage with the unknown.

Finally, working effectively with colonial students requires an understanding of the social and temporal space in which our students engage the local culture. Pratt's (1992) concept of the "contact zone" has been used primarily to refer to the space of colonial encounters but lends itself ideally to furthering our understanding of the nature of student interactions within an education abroad setting. According to Pratt (1992), contact zone refers to "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations." She goes on to say that these social spaces are "often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt, 1992). Originally concerned with the relationship of colonizer to colonized, Pratt's contact zone suggests an asymmetrical relationship between the colonial student and the host native, which is similarly colored with notions of elitism and consumption. In essence, colonial students are becoming the creators and proprietors of their own cultural experiences. They are able to enter a new culture as consumer and proceed to linger within its pleasure periphery interacting only as needed and often in an objective and disassociated manner.

This concept of the contact zone has important implications for education abroad program administration. For example, by going to considerable effort

to meet the expectations of these emerging colonial students, especially when it requires adjusting student services in such a way that the outcome works contrary to intercultural integration, we may in effect be perpetuating the asymmetrical relationship in Pratt's contact zone, or at the very least be reinforcing an inherent division between the colonial student and the host native. Furthermore, to what extent does this contact zone actually limit student exposure only to the front stages of the host culture? Or, put more simply, is having a different experience enough, or should we encourage authenticity?

According to MacCannell (1973, 1976), travelers are motivated by a desire for authentic experiences. Travelers try, or are at least encouraged, to enter "back regions" of the places they visit because, as MacCannell (1973) states, "these regions are associated with intimacy of relations and authenticity of experiences." Applied to education abroad, the back regions are the opposite of the front stage where students and hosts typically interact (i.e. bars, restaurants, hostels, etc.). The back region is typically closed to students: is the place created where the hosts retreat from the gaze of outsiders and where they engage in traditional activities and more authentic communication styles. While education abroad programs conceivably have greater access to activities that are ordinarily closed to outsiders (i.e. field trips, homestay placements, service learning projects, etc.), MacCannell's (1973) argument suggests that in order for outsiders to encounter authentic experiences, they need to get away from the main tourist venues or front stages where only *staged authenticity* occurs. This is a difficult task for, as Boorstin (1961) argues, travelers actually find pleasure in "pseudo events" or superficially contrived experiences (Urry, 2002). He contends that such experiences actually reinforce the bubble by comfortably insulating the traveler from the strangeness of the host environment (Boorstin, 1961).

Although MacCannell and Boorstin are concerned with pseudo-events and staged authenticity, post-modernists on the other hand are not concerned about authenticity in the least (Reisinger and Steiner, 2006). Post-modernists argue that authenticity is meaningless and not a concern for today's travelers. Similarly, Cohen (1995) states that post-modern travelers are not concerned with authentic experiences so long as they enjoy themselves. Having purchased an experience, the post-modern traveler is simply spending and is not necessarily striving to be the brave explorer and inquisitive seeker of authentic cultural experiences.

In fact, the post-modernists might very well conclude that contemporary education abroad students are not in fact colonial students at all, but rather are *post-modern students* who understand all too well that the search for authenticity

of cultural engagement is generally a dubious proposition given the nature of an education abroad experience. The whole globe is a stage on which the post-modern student can revel, moving at will from scene to scene. Abundantly aware that one cannot avoid being an “outsider” no matter how hard one tries, the resolutely realistic, post-modern student gladly assumes the role. The post-modern student recognizes that he/she is just another consumer of the education abroad experience where nothing is authentic. From the post-modern student gaze, drinking with local students in a bar just may be the easiest form of contact that they can enjoyably access on their own. Furthermore, the post-modern student may conclude that the education abroad industry’s tiring insistence on intercultural integration is nothing more than a demonstration of our own colonial gaze that places greater value on the traditional, the classic and the exotification of the “other.” The post-modern student can find just as interesting the crass and crude as he/she does the traditional high arts and culture.

Whether the pursuit of authenticity, however defined, is sought or abandoned, it is important to acknowledge that an era of post-modernism has important and inevitable implications on contemporary education abroad practices. At a time during which student demand is much more volatile and specific, corresponding to a rapid expansion in enrollment, destinations, program themes, student services, and so on, a concerted exploration of the different forms of intercultural engagement, with an emphasis on playfulness and variety, is becoming all too critical.

Conclusion

Like the steady stream of colonial families of decades past traveling to their country’s dominions abroad, contemporary education abroad students are similar passengers on a powerful steamship bound for lands of new sounds, sights and wonders. Although their studies may be challenging and demanding, students are exhilarated with thoughts of new opportunities that await them; after all, they’ve been told to expect an experience of a lifetime. They are yearning for excitement, to travel the world and to experience new things. Many are in search of new knowledge that will inform their studies, new skills that will enable them entry into desirable professions, and new attitudes that will challenge their limited perspectives of the world. Some will become competent speakers of foreign languages, develop close and meaningful ties with people from cultures other than their own and still others will pursue scholarly initiatives in search of new knowledge. However, there are others who are simply enjoying a modern Grand Tour and are not necessarily striving to be the brave

explorer and inquisitive seeker of new cultural experiences. These students see themselves as transients in a world that has somehow afforded them this exceptional privilege, and for whom sitting on the colonial veranda, sipping *sangria*, watching their host culture in action, is comfortable and natural.

If education abroad is about helping students to learn new ways of thinking and to become more complex, interculturally competent individuals, it is not desirable for students to remain comfortably situated on the veranda. Education abroad programs should make it impossible for students to avoid direct and meaningful contact with the host culture, to learn with and from them, to explore new values, assumptions and beliefs. As international educators, we should not be satisfied with simply exposing students to different experiences. Rather we should be satisfied only when our students are engaged and motivated to pursue experiences that lead to transformative personal growth. The education abroad field must proactively navigate this steamship, leading students in the direction that motivates them to want to step outside of their comfort zones. Thus, our role is to understand and address the constraints in our programming or students' perceptions of risk that prevent them from doing so. We should not allow the demands of an emerging colonial student to dictate the creation of a colonial system abroad or put simply, to transpose an American bubble, complete with its complex myriad of expectations, to foreign soil. Otherwise, we make it possible for students to stay on the veranda, viewing the culture and natives from the comfortable position of the privileged elite or timid observer. If there must be a veranda within education abroad, it should not be the platform from which experiences are gained, but rather the place for students to reflect upon their experiences and to embrace the expansive vista of the new culture.

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Appendix

It is often very difficult to reach students in the course of an education abroad experience with information that they are truly ready to listen to and digest. The following is a letter to colonial students that with some institution-specific editing and good timing could be distributed to students with the goal of supporting their intercultural learning and adjustment.

Dear Student,

We hope your semester is going well and that you're having a rewarding, educational, and enjoyable time abroad. We look forward to hearing about your experiences.

Just as we assisted you with your preparations to study abroad, we'd like now to support you in making this one of the most meaningful and unforgettable experiences of your life. Now that the semester is well underway, you're probably settling into your classes, have made some new friendships and have gotten out a bit to explore the community. It wouldn't be unusual at this point to have had initial frustrations and early challenges, too.

We've put together what we consider our top ten tips for making the most of your education abroad experience. Take a few minutes to look over this list as we think you'll find it helpful and maybe even a bit amusing. Of course we understand that each program is different and that you each have your individual goals for this experience abroad. But carefully consider how this advice might apply to your situation and maybe even further enrich your remaining time abroad. It will be over before you know it!

MAKE A FRIEND. Many students tell us when they return to campus that making friends with host nationals was not easy to do. In fact, many report that they simply didn't make even one local friend with whom they plan to stay in contact with. Some students have even gone so far as to say that "they" did not want to make friends with "us." Please keep in mind that socialization patterns are different across cultures and the way one goes about developing and nurturing a friendship can be quite different from here at home. If you're having trouble making local friends, think about the intercultural nuances in your approach. (HINT: *Before you leave be sure to write down your new friends' contact information and not just their email addresses!*)

WRITE ONE STORY, AT LEAST ONE. Using blogs, personal web pages, and chat rooms have become common with education abroad participants. But have you considered writing a narrative about one memorable encounter, an event that stands out as an “Aha!” moment, and submitting it, along with a photo or two, for publication? There are numerous quality publications now for education abroad students, such as *Transitions Abroad*, *Glimpse* and *Abroad View*. By writing about day-to-day observations, you can deepen your understanding of the underlying cultural system that gives sense to those events. Go ahead, get published! (HINT: *Make a promise to yourself not to spend more than one hour a day on email!*)

TRAVEL, BUT NOT EVERY WEEKEND. Go on, explore the area, see the sights, try new things! But don’t forget why you chose to study abroad where you did. Get to know the people in your host community. How do they structure their lives? What concerns are they facing? What makes them happy? Seek to interact with those you would normally not meet, such as the senior population, non-profit groups, minority populations, etc. And truthfully, wouldn’t it be far cheaper and easier to travel as a backpacker later on? (HINT: *Participate in at least one volunteer activity in the community, whether as a one-time only or recurring activity.*)

BREAK AWAY FROM THE FLOCK. The “US ghetto,” “flock” or the “One hundred legged American” are all metaphors regularly applied to U.S. students abroad these days, as students move about in groups, seemingly of one body with multiple legs. Are you finding it hard to break away and form relationships within the host culture? Are you getting caught up in gripe sessions that focus on what’s wrong with the host culture? It is not easy to break away from the safety of the group, but give it a whirl...you’ll be glad you did. (HINT: *Don’t magnify the problems. Gripe sessions should never last beyond five minutes!*)

LIVE LIKE A LOCAL STUDENT. Students often inform us that they spent more money during their first month abroad than for the rest of the semester combined! After the general expense of settling in, students learn with time and experience how to live like local students. Shopping, eating and socializing with local students is surely the best way to control costs and as an added bonus you’ll get to see and do things that you’d never have access to as a tourist. As the adage goes, avoid having an “American

experience” in the vicinity of local events. (HINT: *Join a local student club or activity and stick with it through the end of the semester.*)

SHOW APPRECIATION ACROSS CULTURES. Leaving a gratuity, sending a thank you card or offering a kind word are all typical ways to express our appreciation here in the United States. Showing appreciation in a different culture might require a new approach. In some cultures, for example, gift giving is very important. How do people where you’re studying show their appreciation? Using the language appropriately, observing societal norms and expectations, and following established protocols can demonstrate your appreciation. (HINT: *Classroom based instruction is an effective method to learning the language, but it is only ONE method. Take advantage of all the other ways you can learn and practice the language.*)

INVOLVE YOUR PARENTS BUT DON’T RELY ON THEM. You’ve jumped over many hurdles to be where you are now, including sorting through piles of pre-departure paperwork, maintaining good grades, and careful academic planning. If you’re like most students, you’re family has been very involved and helpful to you throughout this process. Our advice to you now is to view your family as advisors, mentors, or consultants but refrain from using them as assistants, secretaries or trouble shooters. How do local students seek support? (HINT: *Explore the varied resources that are available to you abroad and be sure to understand and follow the appropriate protocols for handling new challenges.*)

CULTURE SHOCK IS NOT BAD. Adjusting to a new culture certainly has its emotional ups and downs. Remember your first weeks abroad when everything was new, exciting, different and fascinating? After a while, it may become difficult to assimilate to the new culture maybe even difficult to know what is appropriate and what is not. Working through these challenges means that you are moving away from being a tourist toward having more meaningful engagement with the culture. As difficult as it can be, this is a time for you to consider your own values, assumptions and beliefs and to explore how they are being challenged by your new experiences. Keep in mind that adjustment depends largely on the individual, degree of cultural difference (and perceptions of similarity) and other situational factors. (HINT: *Find a cultural informant, a local person that can help you make sense of the new culture and the many ambiguous encounters you’ll experience.*)

TAKE THE CULTURE AS SUBJECT OF ACADEMIC STUDY. Traveling, learning the local language, and pursuing outside social interests are just some of the many ways you can enjoy your time abroad. But keep in mind that your academic courses are also a great way to pursue in-depth knowledge of your host culture. Become a specialist in some area of the culture! Don't be satisfied by writing a paper on the contemporary politics of the place where you're studying and not interview a local politician, for example. If you're taking a regional economics course, be sure to visit one or two local businesses, a corporation and a non-profit organization. If you have the opportunity, don't miss out on studying alongside local students by enrolling directly in a local institution. (HINT: *Thinking about graduate school or possibly returning to this region of the world to pursue your career goals? What can you do now to make sure that happens?*)

USE YOUR THIRD EYE. Quite often the most important things you need to know about a culture, no one ever tells you. Through time, experience and keen observation, however, you'll begin to discover the cultural knowledge people are using to organize their behavior. What values, attitudes and assumptions inform that behavior? Try to discover the worldviews of those in the host culture by putting aside your own predetermined notions of the way the world is or should be. Challenge your definitions of discrimination and prejudice. What significance do these issues have for those in the host culture? (HINT: *Be mindful of how your mere presence as an outsider may impact your encounters and interpretation of experiences.*)

And there you have it! Again, we hope that you have as profound and enjoyable experience abroad as possible. We hope that you will not forget the exceptional good fortune which enables you to have the support, resources, and opportunity for such an experience at this stage of your life. And we hope that when the semester comes to a close, your international hosts will be able to say about you, "this was a good young person. We're glad to have had this experience!"

Sincerely,

Education Abroad Office