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ESSAYS

Observing the Craft of Mentoring Students During the Year Abroad

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Abstract

As a senior university manager overseeing targeted study abroad programs in the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), I had the opportunity to accompany Associate Professor Ilaria Vanni-Accarigi on a Block Visit to our students in Italy. This experience deepened my understanding of the nuanced pedagogical approaches that support students' successful international experiences, highlighting the significance of place, time and the intuitive teacher-student relationship in fostering intercultural learning.

Keywords

BAIS; UTS; International Studies; Italy; Intuitive Pedagogy; Student Global Mobility

As a senior university manager in the School that had the responsibility for targeted study abroad programs embedded in the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) degree at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), I was able to support academic staff, the Major Coordinators, who year-on-year negotiated the complexity of processes that resulted in successful student international experiences.

I observed my academic colleagues and their negotiation and engagement with our own UTS university calendar and degree program study plans that had, since the early 1990s, been established to ensure students were well-prepared prior to departure. Pre-departure preparations required two years of language and culture learning. It also required a close examination of the contemporary society where students would spend their year abroad.

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Each year there were invitations for me to attend and officiate at various events in relation to this degree program, such as the Major Coordinators' annual pre-departure meetings and a Welcome Back event held to formally acknowledge returnees' accomplishments after the year abroad. I also attended prize-givings and award ceremonies that variously acknowledged students' outstanding achievements through other faculties or professional associations related to each combined degree. I observed my academic colleagues as they negotiated the ever-changing rules and conventions set by the host country or host university: never-ending paperwork and forms that would facilitate ease-of-entry of our students into cities, districts, cantons, required not only by university officers and visa officials, but in some cases also local police. Those regulatory and governance processes represented the 'mechanics' of supporting student study abroad.

In 2019 I explored beyond the governance and regulations, and I would see for myself the nuances of what it meant to ensure a student's successful personal and academic experience abroad. Accompanying Associate Professor Ilaria Vanni-Accarigi, one of the eleven Major Coordinators, to visit her students abroad in Italy at the mid-program period, I gained a greater understanding of the subtleties of what it means to coordinate and supervise one version of the study abroad 'Block Visit' (or In-Country Studies Visit) program. Most years in the Italian Autumn, Ilaria would take the opportunity to conduct her Block Visit teaching and consultation sessions in the cities where she had placed her students: Milan, Venice, Siena, Bologna and Modena.

I joined Ilaria in a week-long visit to our study abroad students in Bologna, Modena and Venice and listened in on three types of meetings she arranged. First she would meet with the group informally. This may have been a coffee catch-up or a meal together. The second meeting was also pre-arranged for the group and had an academic focus. The third meeting was a separate consultation with each individual student if required.

In the first informal meeting I observed that Ilaria may have been gauging the students' general health and well-being. In the group meeting with the academic focus, the Major Coordinator would ensure the students could pinpoint their progress, assisting them to keep managing their time and keep to task. If I was invited to the individual meetings—understandably some were deeply personal and not suitable for me to attend—the focus remained centrally on the Major Project, the year-long quasi-Honours research project that became a 'capstone' to the student's International Studies degree.

To allow me greater insights into her work than I might have gained should I have purely observed without a framework to observe and make meaning, Ilaria generously deconstructed her pedagogy for her teaching in country. I was fortunate to observe a very fine-tuned professional practice—resulting from 15 years of her teaching in-country studies as a Major Coordinator. Place and time feature strongly at the base of her pedagogy.

Choice of Italian higher education institutions and place—have become an important factor in how Ilaria shapes her work with students—as could be said for each of the Major Coordinators and their country and university destinations. However 'place' plays such an important role in the pedagogy that underpins the year abroad in this degree that it is held as a significant factor in how Ilaria sees teaching and learning abroad. She sees 'place' as a collaborator in students' learning, so she understands and reacts to the nuances in what occurs when students are experiencing the year abroad and learning in different cities.

Ilaria visited students after the summer holidays, the mid-point in the year abroad. She had experimented over the years as to her choice of the best point in the year to visit. By the mid-point, she explained, the student's Major Project had been shaped, but needed refining to completion during the second six months. Students had returned from travelling in the long summer holidays and were usually eager to return to study. By the midpoint, between semester 1 and 2 abroad, at the time of the visit, a draft research proposal for the major project is under construction. The students needed to have proposed a research question, a likely methodology, and to have provided a general scope of the full project.

This is where Ilaria's role and the Block Visit intrigued me. For me this pedagogy is a finely-tuned, highly-nuanced set of steps and stages, requiring not only scholarly expertise, but also an 'intuition' that, in my opinion, is not generally written up in the literature or considered as important in this teacher-learner relationship. Ilaria's belief is that her chosen strategies here draw on the sum of what she knows, the past knowledge about students, their projects and the year abroad, along with her ability to read the landscape and imagine speculative scenarios. It is not only 'intuitive,' but also 'proactive' and 'reactive.'

Ilaria read all individual project outlines prior to group meetings. Discussions formed the basis of her interactions with students. She not only focused on deadlines, academic writing/scholarly presentation, multimedia/digitally-informed resources: information of use to the whole group, but also delving deeper into the details, teasing out research questions, methodologies, arguments through a continued questioning. Active listening is at the heart of this pedagogy, and in a dialogic manner the questioning, paraphrasing and summarising bring focus to the work.

Discussions also branched into making the most of the year abroad in light of any employment search. An 'employment toolbox' full of useful resources would shape that aspect. Highlighted too was the need to archive stories about the year abroad while it's still fresh in students' minds. In individual meetings Ilaria typically introduced digital software and applications which allowed her to provide useful feedback on writing drafts.

I was privileged to experience this one example Block Visit and a very crafted pedagogy by one Major Coordinator. I observed a visit which was highly organised framed by a set of steps and stages which make a lot of sense to students.

I was able to observe the interpersonal relationship of mutual respect between Ilaria and her students, chiefly due to the high levels of organisation, and the considered 'intuiting' of what was needed, and when. I came to realise that in our UTS study abroad educational model, the relationship between Major Coordinator and student is essentially a professional collegial relationship. I observed this as I analysed the way Ilaria and her students interacted with each other, as colleagues in a workplace might. I concluded that at this point, their working together had developed beyond the on-campus teacher-student undergraduate relationship.

I had never previously been in a study abroad classroom such as this one. After this visit, and having observed Ilaria unpack the steps and stages of her pedagogy, I believe I was able to see the very nuanced way our students get to 'know the world'.

I was impressed to observe that the variety of projects supervised and the topics chosen may—or may not—be the Major Coordinator's own special field of expertise. Major Coordinators work hard to co-research the chosen topic with their students.

I saw Ilaria actively engage with the partner universities—some were even difficult conversations where she used her best diplomacy skills (and further intuition) to conduct business and tweak the partner university agreements.

In accompanying this Block Visit, I was reminded too, how international travel is just plain hard work—things go wrong, there are incidents and delays, and many daily challenges such as transport delays or food availability over which no one has control. Major Coordinators work hard to literally or virtually accompany their students through the many aspects of living and studying abroad.

I came away from the trip with deeper understandings of the cities and regions I visited because of the deep dive I had been privileged to experience through the students' eyes. I gained understandings of football fanaticism, the impact of cruise ships on local ecologies, of teaching migrant children, and how a city can be recognised from literary works, to name just a few. Best of all I observed a carefully crafted student-focused teaching pedagogy that required an intuition and a highly tuned open-mindedness intended to benefit all.

Here is where I observed place, time and space to feature in her work. Ilaria shared with me her belief that the lively and sensory interactions that she gets to share with her students in country—being in the same physical space and sharing the sensorium with them—adds something to the learning and teaching that might not be achieved in other study abroad models. Ilaria believes that being ‘embodied’ and ‘emplaced’ created a situation in which she and her students were mutually affected into learning at a time most conducive for this learning to take place.

I believe being exposed to this highly nuanced pedagogy allowed me to observe not a process of reflection but ‘refraction.’ In a final conversation with the Major Coordinator, I understood more fully how she considers the process to be an ‘International Studies way of knowing.’ That is, this process of intercultural learning is not a mirror to reflect the image of our students bouncing back on themselves, unchanged. Rather our International Studies might be seen as refraction, or a way of seeing the colours of the world separately as they pass through the degree program and the mediation afforded by this Major Coordinator and her finely-tuned craft.