

Teaching Abroad in India: travel, writing, and intercultural sensitivity

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Institutional Description:

The University of Pennsylvania, in its pursuit of being “a global research university”¹, founded the office of Penn Global Initiatives. One of the ways Penn undergraduates avail themselves of this global engagement is through Penn Global Seminars, which are a combination of intensive semester-long coursework as well as a short-term travel component that aims to deepens students’ understandings’ of the place they have been studying².

In 2019, The Critical Writing Program launched its first collaboration with Penn Global, offering two Penn Global Critical Writing Seminars: one about South Africa, and another based on India. I taught the India course, entitled The City of Delhi: New, Old, and Unmapped. I taught a second Penn Global Critical Writing Seminar entitled Colonial and Cosmopolitan Encounters in Mumbai - without the travel component - in 2020.

As I am planning to teach the Mumbai course in the future, including travel to India, this research project is situated at the interstices of these two courses. I here reflect on the challenges of course design for a global writing seminar, as well as on how best to garner relevant data from the course(s).

Research Questions:

1. How do writing seminars with an international travel component function, both pedagogically and practically?
2. What are the outcomes of such a course for students and instructors?
3. What role does writing play in students’ engagement with cultures?
4. How does international travel with students inform teaching practice for writing faculty?

Key Theorists

There is a paucity of studies that analyze the teaching of writing in courses that include a study abroad component. The few that do are all geared to long-term rather than short-term study (Gindlesparger 2018; Woolf 2013). For example, in her article “The Creative Process and Travel”, Hemley notes that “typically, such a workshop runs from two to four weeks. Anything less hardly seems worth the travel” (2012:316). She further elaborates that “two weeks is not a long time in which to soak up and understand a culture in which one has no prior experience, though it’s not an impossibility” (2012:317).

¹ <https://global.upenn.edu/global-initiatives/about-penn-global>

² <https://global.upenn.edu/pennabroad/pgs>

Penn Global Seminars' goals are more modest: to expose students to a place they have been studying for a semester, while exposing them to the place itself, and, most importantly, complicating the idea of travel itself. To seek to "soak up" a culture seems both passive and presumptive that immersion in a new culture is unidirectional. My Penn Global Seminars foster active engagement between students and their new environments and challenges them to think about the ways they might impact the places they are visiting.

More aligned to writing and rhetoric is Gindlesparger's article on the genre of the study-abroad blog. She asks questions which may be discomfiting but are nevertheless worthwhile. For example, "what happens if and when a student's time abroad prompts deep, justifiably uncomfortable and life-changing reflection, as it should?" (2018:8). Gindlesparger cites others in the field who emphasize the ethics of writing to an 'other' (Duffy, cited in Gindlesparger, 2018), and the empathy required in such undertakings (Jurecic; Keen; Kulbaga, cited in Gindlesparger, 2018). She notes, however that "these discussions of empathy and identification have not yet appeared explicitly in writing practices and pedagogy embedded within study abroad" (2018:8). Synthesizing Hemley's findings about the one-way depiction of study abroad experiences, and Gindlesparger's attempts to use writing as a tool for students to make sense of their travels, I argue that there is a need for research which examines the complex, multidirectional changes arising from short-term travel abroad programs for writing-specific courses. This paper is the beginning of such a research undertaking.

Finally, as Pedersen notes that "while most study abroad programs would agree that such outcomes include more than "good grade", they do little to actively intervene regarding learner outcomes related to intercultural effectiveness" (2009:70). Her research therefore seeks to evaluate intercultural pedagogy and in situ intervention with such students while they are studying abroad, using a measure of intercultural effectiveness developed by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Similarly, in their 2006 study, Anderson et al. use a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity to measure the changes in students who have conducted short-term travel for educational purposes. While this tool includes an assessment of students' academic development, I propose to further explore this development by including writing as a factor in students' educational trajectories. That is, I am seeking to examine students' writing as a tool for understanding their growth as writers, travelers, and learners.

Background and Methodology

Based on my experience with two Penn Global Critical Writing Seminars in India (Delhi in 2019, Mumbai in 2020), this research reflects on the experience of conceptualizing and teaching such courses. In this study, I attempt to document the academic and personal outcomes for students on such courses, which include travel from Philadelphia to India, as well as my own pedagogical reflections. Temporally situated in between these two courses (travel to Delhi was in March 2019; travel to Mumbai will be in late

2021 or early 2022), this research helps me to reflect backwards and forwards. Using writing studies concepts (genre, audience, rhetoric), I attempt to map the progress of students on these courses in understanding themselves, the sites to which they travel, and the utility of writing as a framework for relating to the world.

This study involves qualitative analysis of course outcomes (students' written work, oral testimonies, evaluations), and ethnographic data collected through the instructor's own participant observations of these courses. As can often occur, outcomes are complex and varied, not necessarily fitting neatly into assigned categories, and they can be challenging to fully capture. I found that some of the changes which occurred in students were subtle to the point of being almost intangible, were more evident over the long term and were perhaps imperceptible to someone who did not already know the student well. Sometimes dramatic shifts in students' personalities or values do occur, but more often than not, the changes in reflexivity and intercultural sensitivity are most perceptible to the students themselves, and/or to those closely interacting with them.

Tentative Results, Conclusions, or Hypotheses

In terms of outcomes, I see this research producing a wide range of results which can serve as conceptual maps of students' progress in understanding: (A) themselves, (B) the sites to which they travel, and (C) the utility of writing as a framework for relating to the world. I further explore these areas below:

(A) Students' self-understandings

From my observations, it was evident that students' self-understandings underwent significant changes following their travels to Delhi. Throughout the course – before travelling, whilst in India, and after the travel component – I used reflection as a method of capturing these changes. Because the travel component occurred midway through the course, I was able to assign reflective writing after we returned from Delhi, something I will not be able to do after Mumbai, as we will travel at semester's end. However, beyond quoting student testimonials, it is difficult for me to say anything meaningful about students' experiences for several reasons: their experiences are all different, are personal, sometimes subtle, and occur through ongoing self-reflection over the long term. To provide new insights, such research would need to go beyond the observation of "I grew as a person" as a standard outcome.

For example, here is one student's testimony:

"The Global Seminar which took my class and me to Delhi was the first of its kind in that it was the first writing seminar at Penn which took the class abroad. The trip did not simply provide me with a deeper understanding of the culture and history of Delhi--and by extension, India--but it also enhanced what I was already learning in class in ways I could not imagine. Equipped with the readings which we did at Penn about the city, experiencing the vibrancy and splendor of Delhi was even more extraordinary with the foreknowledge of its intricacies. This is not to say that I was not surprised by all that

India had to offer. The subtleties of a country so different from what I knew still left me perplexed; from the food to the organized chaos in its streets, India unmapped a plethora of questions which pushed me to open myself up to new horizons...The trip contributed deeply to my research about Delhi's monuments through the 20th century and visiting said monuments during our travels allowed me to concretize my writing on the subject. I had only read about the inhabitations and changes undergone by those places during the 20th century but exploring them firsthand offered me a unique lens from which to understand how the political and social fluctuations of colonial and independent India influenced Delhi's physical past."³

This student's reflections are articulate and substantive, noting specific aspects of Delhi's history and geography that he had studied which were enhanced by his personal experience of the city. He further goes on to mention specific highlights, such as maneuvering the crowded market streets of Old Delhi and seeing the sunrise on the Taj Mahal. As heartening as it can be to read such testimony, it does not easily lend itself to an analytic framework.

(B) Relating to sites of travel

I facilitated students' learning about Delhi through assigned readings before the travel component, through class discussions, efforts to engage with local culture (beyond a touristic framework) whilst travelling and giving students time to explore Delhi on their own. In 2020, I invited the author of our class text, *The Archive of Loss*⁴, to speak to the class about her experience of traveling to and writing about Mumbai. Students relished the opportunity, engaging in deep conversation with the author, an experience possibly enhanced by the fact that they knew they would not be traveling to Mumbai.

Given the desire to capture students' unique travel experiences, along with my colleague who took a Penn Global Seminar to South Africa, I assigned a photo essay to the Delhi class (six of their own photos from the trip + accompanying text explaining their choice of images), which was a useful exercise in reflection. (For the Mumbai students, I assigned a presentation of sites they plan to visit when they have the opportunity to travel there). As an object accessible to anyone, the photo essay is one way to capture what students see as their most important experiences, or at least those that they are willing to share.

(C) Writing as a framework for engagement

I would like to include a writing component for students while they are travelling. I want to do this in a way that it feels like an enhancement of the travel experience, rather than a detraction from it. The idea is that this can then feed into the reflection portion of our travels, perhaps at the end of each day, or in the mornings before we set off for each day's excursions. My desire to include a writing component is based on research which connects teaching writing and travelling abroad (Anderson et al., 2006; Woolf, 2013). I

³ <https://global.upenn.edu/pennabroad/person/bilal-azeer>

⁴ <https://www.dukeupress.edu/the-archive-of-loss/>

would like to be more deliberate about sharing this research with students. By explicitly discussing writing studies concepts (genre, audience, rhetoric, and transfer) with students, I hope to give them a framework for theorizing their future travels.

In relation to my final research question, “How does international travel with students inform the teaching practices of writing faculty?”, I feel this might be the most fruitful direction in which to take this research. Given the complexities of collecting data about students’ experiences, and the ways in which this is qualitatively hard to read and analyze (e.g., “I learned about the world by travelling”), my own reflections on the complete process – from course design to student experiences – might best be captured and structured through this paper. As such, it has the potential to enter a space which is hitherto unoccupied: that of research which highlights short-term study abroad experiences of students in writing-in-the-disciplines classrooms.

**How do you see this project fitting into the work of other writing researchers?
What might other participants get out of interacting with your research?**

This work can enter the dialogue about the role and function of international travel in teaching writing. Other participants might learn about what such courses look like from an instructor’s point of view, as well as from a student perspective. This research might help others gain an understanding of how to approach travel opportunities in teaching, and what considerations to make in designing such courses.

What kind of professional audience, journal, or scholarly venue might be interested in your research?

This research might be of interest to the journal *Writing and Pedagogy*, in particular, the Reflections on Practice series, which seeks work “addressing practical concerns related to writing and pedagogy or describing and critically reflecting on original teaching practices and setting these in a larger context of educational issues or writing theory.”

References:

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