Studying Abroad in Italy – Applying Theory to Practice
Why students' negative experiences abroad can actually signal growth, and how to promote student success through involvement

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After seeing a drastic drop in numbers due to the pandemic, study abroad in Italy has rebounded in a remarkable way. According to the Institute of International Education's Open Door Report (2023), there were over 30,000 US study abroad students in Italy during the 2021/2022 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2023), making it the most popular destination for US students abroad. This makes up a significant proportion of all US students who had international experiences that academic year. While there are a number of extremely positive outcomes to educational opportunities abroad, they also come with their own set of developmental issues and challenges that are not always clear to students pre-departure. This ambiguity can be due to a number of reasons, including the desire of Higher Educational Institutions to boost enrollment and participation in Study Abroad during the recruitment and pre-departure phase, which in turn means dedicating more time focusing on the benefits of international experiences (which are many) rather than stressing the ways it can be difficult. Ultimately, however, the challenges students face contribute to increased student success and self actualization in the long run. In order to better understand and unfold the details of the student experience, I will be applying Baxter Magolda's (2001) Theory of Self-Authorship and Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement to some common adjustment issues students face when studying abroad. Finally, I will be providing my own conclusions on how these challenges and theoretical applications may impact the practice of student affairs and advising.

Theoretical models and definitions

This essay focuses on two important themes: student identity de-

velopment and student involvement and success through the lens of two theoretical models.

First, *self-authorship*, as defined by Baxter Magolda (2001), is "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity and social relations" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 183). According to this model, individuals, and in particular students, go through four phases of self-authorship, including: following formulas, crossroads, becoming the author of one's life, and internal foundation. The phases progressively move from an individual's actions and beliefs being influenced by external forces and norms (following formulas), to grappling with the conflicts that arise between external forces and one's own internal beliefs, needs and interests (crossroads), to being able to rely solely on one's own beliefs and values and stand up for themselves in the face of adversity (self-authorship). The final phase involves solidifying one's internal foundation, and using personal convictions as a compass for life's choices (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Astin's (1984) *Theory of Student Involvement* states that the level of a student's involvement, or physical and psychological energy, they invest in any given object or activity during their experience at a higher education institution is directly proportional to the amount of their learning and personal development (Astin, 1984). In other words, the more students feels connected to their educational community by engaging in co-curricular and extracurricular activities, the more they will thrive in an international setting.

Transition to life abroad

Inevitably, students who travel, study, and intern abroad will at some point face challenges that relate to the transition from their home country to life abroad. Goodman et al. (2006) defines a transition as "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 215). As a result of the dramatic event of moving from their home country to Italy, US and international study abroad students typically encounter psychological, academic, and sociocultural issues relating to this challenge (Harper et al., 2009).

In the case of most study abroad programs in Florence, Italy, the first

layer of this transition comes when students encounter their new room-mates. While some students request friends as their roommates in advance, the majority will be living with at least 1-2 individuals they have never met before. This could bring conflicting and sometimes dramatic lifestyle changes which make the transitional period even more challenging.

This discomfort is often clearly evidenced in program evaluations where students cite roommate situations to be among some of the biggest adjustments they've made during their time here. If we follow Baxter Magolda's (2001) model of identity development, it is easy to understand how students may come into their study abroad experience with a whole host of preconceived values and ideas that they have initially learned from "external forces" such as family, friends, and their home institutions but have started to internalize and claim as their own. When these internalized aspects are then confronted with new roommates who are bringing with them their own perspectives and values, students then enter phase two of grappling with how the new external norms (their new roommates and living situation) differ from their own internal beliefs, needs, and interests. This crossroads phase of Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, is the 2nd of four, clearly demonstrating progress on the path to self-actualization, and can only be achieved when confronted with conflicting values and norms from one's own.

Another part of this transition and growth during study abroad involves coming face to face with the new culture as it relates to the expectations and norms of each student, starting from their own upbringing, cultural realities, and day-to-day habits in addition to how well they understand their host country and the expectations they bring into their experiences. "Winkelman (1994) defines culture shock as 'a multifaceted experience resulting from numerous stressors occurring in contact with a different culture,'" (Harper et al., 2012, p. 21-22).

In the field of study abroad, culture shock is often defined and represented by the W-Curve Model, initially introduced by Gullahorn and Gullahorn in 1963. In this model, students come into the experience in an almost euphoric state often dubbed "The Honeymoon Stage," followed

by a progressively more negative experience until they crash into the depths of culture shock before beginning to adjust to the experience (The Exchange Student, 2015).

In a recent *Insider* article that sent shockwaves through the field of study abroad, Stacia Datskovska outlined her negative experiences during her time in Florence, Italy. In the excerpt below, we can clearly see specific sociocultural challenges, such as culture shock, exemplified in the way Datskovska perceived the locals' attitudes towards her. While speaking about her experience, Datskovska writes:

> I'm not quite sure whom I resented more during my stay in Italy: my American classmates or the locals. The latter is often described as soulful, charming, and overflowing with hospitality, but I could provide concrete examples of them being hostile, inconsiderate, and preposterous. For example, one time, two women were talking about me on the bus, looking at me up and down and scoffing. There were a couple of incidents of verbal confrontations (Datskovska, 2023).

What makes Datskovska's piece interesting is that she wrote it at the end of her experience in Italy. This would either suggest that her experience did not align with traditional understandings of culture shock or that she had not completely cycled through the full W-curve model which ends in acceptance and integration (The Exchange Student, 2015).

This clearly represents an example of why student advising and support in all of the phases of a study abroad is so critical. Maintaining solid support for students during application, pre-departure, post-departure, and re-entry phases can help students continue on their path to development, even if their experiences and timelines differ from pre-existing models.

I also found Datskovska's response to this perceived discrimination very interesting:

> I started to protest by presenting myself to the public in a way I knew they'd hate. I started wearing American-brand athleisure,

Nike Air Max 97s, and oversize hoodies. The Italians rolled their eyes as I passed them on the street (Datskovska, 2023).

Instead of exclusively taking steps to integrate into local norms, expectations, and habits, Datskovska chose here to exaggerate and put on full display what made her American. In reality, it is not all that uncommon of a reaction and, in my opinion, not one to be immediately disregarded or admonished.

In Baxter Magolda's (2001) Theory of Self-Authorship, this type of behavior can actually provide evidence of her moving through the stages to self-authorship and integration. This behavior of reinforcing her Americanness can represent Datskovska's shift from being guided solely by external expectations (in particular, those of Italian locals), and coming to a crossroads while battling conflicting external attitudes and behaviors with her own internal identities and beliefs (her identity as an American). Each student will move through these phases at their own pace, and ultimately learn more about themselves in the process. What can help promote success and self-authorship also includes deeper involvement in students' surroundings which help them navigate conflicting perspectives on their path to self realization (Baxter and Magolda, 2001).

As study abroad administrators and international educators, we can take this example to help integrate more targeted teaching and learning towards the intricacies of Italian cultural norms and the expectation of public decorum for our students. Fundamentally, we want our students to move through their experience while respecting local cultures and norms as they navigate their own development. In this way, they may be able to begin internalizing aspects of their identity which do and don't align with local customs. Discrimination may be a part of this process, but it is not always what it seems.

For example, Julie Ficarra has studied the impact of Study Abroad on host cultures, focusing in part on Florence, Italy. In her research, she found that while there was some dissonance between the host culture and visiting American students, there was also the perception from local hosts

that the city of Florence is underutilizing the presence of US students in town to engage in cross-cultural learning and engagement. Specifically, while many local residents can feel burned out by the ever-growing international presence of students and tourists, some do believe that better infrastructure and intentional integration could help residents and visiting students maximize their relationship with one another (Ficarra, 2019). If we put this into practice, study abroad institutions would be wise to offer as many intentional opportunities for both structured and informal engagement in the community to help soften the feelings of discrimination and "otherness."

Helping students understand these perspectives, and maintaining positive relationships with local vendors, community members, and organizations can help close this gap between our student populations and Florentine residents. As student affairs professionals, we must also exhibit continued patience with our students who can understandably struggle with the transition from life in the US to life abroad. Negative reactions to their host country can be a normal part of this process which students must simply move through to the benefit of their overall growth and development. This growth and development will continue long after students return home, which is another key point to keep in mind.

Student involvement and success

Existing literature would suggest that the more a student is involved and engaged in out-of-class activities, the more successful the transition and the more capable study abroad students are of working through their psychological, academic, and sociocultural issues (Harper et al., 2012). For example, Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement can be applied to any study abroad student's experience in order to unfold how they cope with transitioning to life abroad. In other words, the increased level of student involvement in any given object or activity during their experience at a higher education institution is directly proportional to the amount of their learning and personal development (Astin, 1984). Therefore, challenges with psychological and sociocultural issues appear to be softened

by involvement in various groups within the educational community.

In a piece that ISI Florence student Elizabeth Mueller wrote for The Florentine, she offers a point-by-point response to Datskovksy's article in which she describes her experiences as vastly more positive (Mueller, 2023). What we know about Mueller's experience during her semester abroad is that she was well-integrated in the ISI Florence community. Her involvement in the Global Leadership Program, which includes a series of professional and personal development opportunities, allowed her to bring her own skills and abilities into this new reality while continuing to learn about her new surroundings.

Her willingness to engage in active exploration evidently contributed to her ability to cope with the transitions associated with living and studying in a foreign country. Mueller deliberately engaged in activities that pushed the limits of her personal comfort zone. These attempts at widening her horizons of understanding the world through different lenses are in line with Baxter Magolda's (2001) Theory of Self-Authorship.

From the institutional perspective, continuing to provide high quality, thoughtful, and engaging co-curricular opportunities is critical when it comes to student success. These programs can take the form of cultural activities, internship or volunteer opportunities, and extracurricular programming which allows for a deeper connection to the local community.

Implications for practice

Given the dramatic transition of moving to a foreign country to pursue part or all of a postsecondary education experience, international and study abroad students are at risk of suffering from serious issues, including but not limited to depression, isolation, homesickness, academic and linguistic challenges, culture shock, and discrimination (Harper, 2012). With nearly 190,000 U.S. students who studied abroad in 2021/2022, it is imperative that student affairs professionals be prepared to provide support to these students in order to help them cope with their issues and foster healthy personal development and growth during their time abroad. More importantly, it would be wise to remind students that it is only in

the face of challenge and being confronted with difference, that we can grow secure in ourselves and our own unique identity.

Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement and Baxter Magolda's (2001) Theory of Self-Authorship, Gullahorn and Gullahorn's W-curve model (1923), along with other relevant student development theories, can be applied to students' experiences in order to shed light on how to strategically give each individual the tools they need to conquer the challenges they may encounter. Mueller's experience would suggest that involvement in out-of-class initiatives and active, deliberate exploration beyond pre-determined formulas can be beneficial to study abroad students seeking to overcome typical issues that generally affect this student population. To this end student affairs professionals should keep in mind that providing students with support and encouragement to become involved in institutional organizations and activities is key to helping them adjust to this transition. In addition, challenging them to push their limits in order to break out of the mold can help bring them to that next level in their development and growth. Of course, not all students are the same or will respond in the same way to these opportunities. This is why it is important that student affairs professionals utilize theory as a starting point and ensure that it guides and informs their work.

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