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What the Unglamorous Side of Study Abroad Taught Me

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What the Unglamorous Side of Study Abroad Taught Me

Abstract

I've been gallivanting around this beautiful planet posing as a study abroad student taking classes and writing papers for the past academic year, one semester in England and one in Argentina (where I still am) and, just like all the brochures, promotions, and panels of study abroad survivors say, it has been absolutely chock-full of amazing experiences, people, places, foods—I think “transformative” is the proper term.

But transformative can mean many things. It doesn't just mean that you “find yourself” or “change your life”—it means you see the less glamorous stuff about yourself, too. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, study abroad, cultural adjustment, immigration, foreign language, culture shock, Argentina

Disciplines

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Community-Based Research | Latin American Languages and Societies | Latin American Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Social Psychology | Social Psychology and Interaction | Tourism

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

WHAT THE UNGLAMOROUS SIDE OF STUDY ABROAD TAUGHT ME

May 20, 2013

I've been gallivanting around this beautiful planet posing as a study abroad student taking classes and writing papers for the past academic year, one semester in England and one in Argentina (where I still am) and, just like all the brochures, promotions, and panels of study abroad survivors say, it has been absolutely chock-full of amazing experiences, people, places, foods—I think “transformative” is the proper term.

But transformative can mean many things. It doesn't just mean that you “find yourself” or “change your life”—it means you see the less glamorous stuff about yourself, too.

It means that you find out that instead of making friends with the Argentines like you said you would, instead of branching out and embracing the culture, instead of taking risks with your language, you clam up, hold back, and stick with your American friends. You find yourself sticking with the people you understand, people with a language and ideas that you know. And you think—in fact, you are sure—at the beginning of the semester that it will not happen to you.

But...then it does.

And what has made this experience so interesting for me is that I can't help but see connections between my time abroad as an expatriate—a “temporary immigrant” moving between cultures, fighting cultural identity crises, lost in translation, and paralyzed by culture shock—and issues surrounding immigration in the States.

Now, don't jump too quickly to belittling my analogy.

I know my experience is absolutely different than the life of an actual immigrant. I haven't faced institutional racism like the inability to find a place to live or a decent paying job and I'm not discriminated against in the classroom. Not economic pressure, war, poor education nor political strife drove me away from home and separated me from family. Yet, I find that despite all my safety nets and my ability to return to a secure home, my



inhibitions in assimilating to the culture, my timidity in reaching out to the Argentines, and my clamming-up in the face of culture shock are all too similar to the experiences of immigrants in the States:

- I get nervous about my language skills.
- I've worried I'll be rejected (or hated) because of where I'm from.
- I don't always know how to ask for what I need.
- I feel linguistically infantilized.
- I tend to hang out with Americans more than Argentines.

Coping with being outside of our comfort zones in a foreign country, without our mother tongue and without the sureties of home are experiences that do overlap. My circumstances are different from immigrants, the reason for my journey is different—but our fears, our inclinations, and our coping mechanisms are definitely similar if not the same.

I can tell you from personal experience as a “temporary immigrant” to two countries, as a person who's done the ‘language immersion thing,’ the ‘enroll in a foreign university thing,’ and the ‘fitting into a new culture thing’ that these actions and norms and insecurities aren't just things that people coming to America feel. It's bigger than that. They're things that all travelers/expatriates/immigrants feel. And that means that we need to recognize having difficulties in cultural assimilation not as something unique to certain communities or people groups, but as something common to all.

So, *what can we do?*

I know that for me, I feel most accepted and most happy in Argentina when I am encouraged by people who pursue spending time with me. By people who reach out to me first. Who invite me to things, don't judge me, and are patient with me. Who are willing to listen to me, to understand that I'm not stupid despite my language skills, to see that I am someone worth knowing, that I am someone in whom it is worth investing time, that I'm trying my hardest—that I matter.

We as a nation should not just be accepting of immigrants only because we are a nation of immigrants. That argument is too weak. We should be accepting and encouraging to new citizens in our communities because they are people. Because they are people more than they are immigrants. Because they are worth knowing and worth helping. All people need acceptance. And all people need a home. All people need the patience and compassion of others when they're learning new things or moving new places or restructuring their identities, families, and livelihoods.

Sure, our nation needs to address systemic issues of injustice and the current immigration system needs reform. But we can make change now by thinking on an individual level – reaching out to people who we are more used to judging than understanding, people we overlook instead of pursue, people who deserve our attention, patience, understanding, and compassion.

That starts with me and you. That starts with reaching out to a family in your neighborhood or the kids at El Centro (shameless plug) or the international students on campus. It starts with one. Break down the barriers. Reach out. Stop being confined by stereotypes. Change the mentality.

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