



## Make it a Double: Combining Research with Study Abroad

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*Taking students overseas is a great adventure, but also a challenge. After four years of taking students groups to Europe for academic conferences mixed with foreign experiences, Bob Bergland shares what he learned to do, and not do.*

The scene was perfect: a warm, Grecian sun, the turquoise waters of the Mediterranean lapping on the beach, the smell of fresh gyros. The only thing missing in that lunch break between sessions at the International Conference on Communication and Mass Media was the students. The only thing spoiling the moment was a sense of guilt. The student co-authors on the paper we wrote and presented were not there.

Over the next three years, that guilt was transformed into a mission: to find a way to make it possible for numerous communication/journalism students to engage in scholarly research, to present that research at an international conference and to have an educational trip of a lifetime that they could afford. That mission has been accomplished not once, but four times (2010, 2014, 2016 and 2018). Twenty-nine students have been able to go on a 17- to 19-day European trip, presenting their research at one of two international conferences they have attended, seeing other major European cities as well, at a very reasonable cost.

### **The Research/Class**

One of the reasons the trips have been successful and affordable is because of support from the universi-

ty, in the form of approving a spring special topics "International Journalism Research" course proposal and agreeing to divert the tuition dollars from study abroad students for that course (roughly \$600) and a one-credit Maymester course (another \$200) into the study away pot of money. That setup not only offsets insurance costs, study abroad office costs and instructor trip expenses, but has created a framework for the students to conduct their research.

The key to the research presentation success has been finding projects with a manageable scope and a methodology that accommodates their limited data collection/analysis experience. The students usually work in pairs in order to either reduce the amount of data each needs to collect or to provide greater reliability by having both students code and analyze the same data. Some sample papers have included the following:

- Two papers (one on Twitter, one on Facebook) that compared 2016 Democratic and Republican primary candidates' use of social media
- An analysis of website features of daily newspapers in the United Kingdom (comparing the data to a similar study done on U.S. dailies)

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- A comparison of the number, size and type of front page advertisements in newspapers in the U.S. vs. Europe (using front pages on the Newseum website)

- A comparison of U.S. vs. European front page news content (also using the Newseum website, and a taxonomy from a previous U.S.-based study)

- A qualitative study of a converged local newspaper/TV station.

All except one of the projects has required IRB approval. All have involved data collection/coding/analysis that, with training, has been very doable by upper-level undergraduates. And, because students know their work will be seen by international scholars, they take their research very seriously. Some of my proudest moments as a teacher have been seeing the students beaming after their successful presentations and hearing conference attendees' comments about how impressed they are with the work of these graduate students — and how shocked they are to learn that almost all of them are undergraduates!

### **The Conferences/Trip**

The International Conference on Communication and Mass Media, held in or near Athens in mid-May every year, became the cornerstone for the inaugural study abroad trip, along with a second conference, the Internet Technology and Journalism conference held every year in late May in Dubrovnik, Croatia. Outside of one year when we attended a different conference (the International Conference on Communication, Media, Technology and Design in Zagreb in 2016), those two conferences have become the starting and ending points for the trip. In the roughly 10 days between the conferences, we have visited London, Rome, Venice and other cities.

### **Financing/Planning**

In addition to the tuition money diversion generously approved by the provost, creativity, flexibility and hard work have also been critical. Rather than go with a pre-packaged travel agency plan that would run \$4,000-\$5,000 for such a long trip, the trip has been self-planned. That has meant checking out hundreds of variations of dates, gateway cities and inter-European flights, busses, trains and ferries. It has meant checking hundreds of hotel, hostel and other lodging options. But, the end result is having complete control over the itinerary, the ability to add destinations that that year's group of students are interested in (such as D.C. and Paris in 2016, Dublin and Edinburgh in

2018). Most importantly, the cost has been between \$2,250 and \$2,850 per student, covering all of their transportation and lodging expenses, a day bus tour of Stonehenge/Bath/Windsor Castle and a Shakespeare play at the Globe Theatre.

Students have also benefitted from university foundation support. Because the students are all presenting at a conference, they are eligible for funding from the Missouri Western Foundation, knocking up to \$700 off their bill (many universities, foundations and student governments have such pots of funds available). So, for near or under \$2,000, students have taken a lengthy trip to some of the top destinations in Europe, experienced two academic conferences, learned much about research, improved their job/graduate school chances, and had pictures and memories to last a lifetime.

### **Lessons Learned**

As one can expect in taking nearly 30 students on European trips lasting 17-19 days, not everything has been as perfect as that day on the beach in Greece. Some tips/lessons learned from the four trips:

1. *If possible, travel to your planned destinations before you go on the trip.* The more the trip leader is familiar with the cities, the public transportation and housing options, the better the planning and the time in those cities will be.

2. *If possible, take two leaders on the trip.* The trips described above have been done solo to keep costs low, since having another faculty member inflates the cost. That worked out fine until this last trip, when a student's medical emergency resulted in an eight-hour wait in a Dublin emergency room and the other students needing to operate without my guidance in a new city. Having a second person (be it a spouse or additional staff or faculty member) provides great flexibility if things go wrong.

3. *Things will go wrong.* The trips have not been without some drama. In addition to the medical emergency, wallets have been pickpocketed. Clothes and cell phone chargers have been left in rooms. Students have been temporarily lost. One tip is to plan ahead to reduce the chance of those things affecting the trip (such as carrying an extra credit/ATM card elsewhere, building in extra time for flight connections or extra time to get to the airport to accommodate tardy students) and not to let those things stress the leader out. But all the planning can't prevent some things from going wrong. For example, the 2018 trip

involved a seven-hour layover in London on the way to Athens, but that was not enough to accommodate the eight-hour delay on the flight to London (fortunately, the students got a \$725 refund for the delay, reducing their total trip cost to \$1,000).

4. *Conference and conference again with students on their research.* There have admittedly been a few subpar presentations, the result of overestimating those students' understanding of academic research. In several cases, meeting with them more often as they designed their methodology and conducted their pilot tests would have made sure they were on the right path.

5. *Have them give their presentations multiple times.* The most successful presentations have been when we a) made the presentation of the research their final exam in the spring class; b) had them revise their presentations and present again to the other study abroad students a day or two before the mid-May departure; c) have them practice their presentations again the night before the conference.

6. *Travel light.* Students first balk having a single, 20-pound carry-on piece of luggage, but by the end — thanks to a mid-journey laundry opportunity — they are glad to have saved hundreds of dollars in checked luggage fees and the hassle of carrying around a lot of luggage.

7. *The key to happiness is low expectations.* It's important for students go into the trip knowing that not everything will be perfect and fancy, especially on a trip designed to see so much in so little time for so little money. They need to understand there will be lots of walking. That hostel in Rome, while affordable and in a great location next to the key sites, may have inadequate hot water some mornings and sketchy wi-fi. Over the course of nearly three weeks, it's inevitable that a travel companion — and especially the teacher/guide! — may get on their nerves. The less they expect things to be perfect, the happier they will be.

8. *Listen to the students — before, during and after the trip.* Involve them in the planning as much as possible. Having them help select the cities and research and select some of the lodging options ensures they will be more happy with the trip — or at least less able to complain if that city/hotel is less than they expected. During the trip, pay attention to their physical and mental well-being.

One key lesson learned the hard way from early trips is that it is okay for an exhausted student — or an exhausted group — to skip a less important

item on the itinerary. Piazza Navona is nice, but not worth it if it means students are too tired from the extra walking to truly appreciate the Vatican. As has been learned from early trips, seeing five top sites in London in depth is better than whizzing around to 10. After the trip, have students write evaluations of the experience that help guide future trip decisions. For example, student concerns about the many flight legs on this last trip have resulted in a tentative plan for next year for a rail-friendly set of cities (Prague, Budapest, Vienna, Munich) that will avoid the stress, time and expense of getting to and from airports.

This essay outlines what worked — and what didn't — for these overseas trips, in order to provide a model for such a trip that others could take. But, know that this model could be scaled back for any trip that combines research and study abroad, whether it be 500 or 5,000 miles away. For instance, the June 2019 International Environmental Communication Association conference in British Columbia could be combined with a 5-10 day camping trip in Washington, Oregon and British Columbia. The NCA conference in Baltimore? Add on a week with educational and communication-oriented stops (such as the Newseum or the USA Today headquarters) in Washington, D.C. Regardless of the destination, attending/presenting at the conference, when coupled with other educational, eye-opening opportunities, can create an experience the students will remember for a lifetime.

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