

A CLASSROOM WITHOUT WALLS: INNOVATIVE OPTIONS TO EXPLORE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Student travel is popular in today's globetrotting society. Many students take advantage of semester abroad programs to extend their educational experience. For the most part, these programs are very expensive. Faculty also are involved in travel through faculty exchanges and sabbaticals. However, for many faculty taking long trips abroad are not feasible with semester teaching obligations and family ties. This paper describes a learning program that eliminates many obstacles in educational opportunities in foreign countries with a dynamic learning structure.

INTRODUCTION

Sixteen days, seven cities/towns, 26 students, two professors, seven lectures by six Irish professors – it all added up to a full itinerary that required months of planning and recruiting. Think of it as an educational marathon – extensive preparation followed by a rewarding but exhausting journey. University lectures by Irish faculty were offered at Dublin City University, and the National Universities in Cork and Galway. There was time for students to explore Dublin, Cork, Galway, and other Irish communities. Other trips, such as to Howth, Cobh, Doolin, and the Dingle Peninsula were to simply enjoy the natural beauty of the island as well as the cultural delights of music, dance, art, and literature. Most of the activities included travel time, the specific activity, and other points of interest in the area. The detailed itinerary is in Appendix A.

Here's how we did it and did it on a budget that appealed to students. Our evaluation of the course has proven that bringing the classroom to the subject is a very effective way of providing a well-rounded and complete undergraduate education for our students. This paper describes an alternative mode of teaching through travel. The key points postulated to be a beneficial learning experience were:

- A short course, 16 days in duration that is fast paced and concentrated on one country.

- Student and faculty learning is commingled in a nontraditional "classroom" environment where both parties achieve an understanding of the subject as well as an understanding of how they both see the issues.
- An extremely cost effective manner to extend learning academic experiences beyond the walls of the classroom and beyond the college campus. This program cost a fraction of what other travel abroad programs cost without eliminating the synergistic impact of faculty-student involvement in the learning experience.

The college credit earned resides with the students' university, thus eliminating the hassle of transcript transfer. The template for this particular study tour can be applied to other travel experiences.

BACKGROUND

There we sat atop the Guinness Brewery in Dublin, Ireland, enjoying the brew looking out at the panorama of Dublin stretched out below. This was the first stop listed on an itinerary that would include in addition to Dublin: Cobh (Cork), Dingle, Doolin (including the Aran Islands), Galway, and Belfast. The smooth tasting Guinness (here in the states, we drink a pasteurized version that adds a bite to the taste) was just one more reminder of how well the Irish do things. This was an auspicious beginning. The brewery tour was fascinating, the display of past and present Guinness advertisements was humorous and enlightening (what a contrast to American advertising; we make a lot of boasts, but we never claim that American brews are good for one's health) and everyone enjoyed the peaceful easy feeling while quaffing Guinness and surveying this corner of the Emerald Isle which really is very green. Pubs, castles, a thriving economy, historical venues, the Euro, plenty of shopping options; this promised to be an unequalled educational experience.

On a more important note, the purpose of the course was to explore and understand the economic surge the Republic of Ireland has been enjoying. During the tour, students were provided with the opportunity to understand the economic development of the Irish business community and its role in the European Union. Scheduled visits to three universities would feature lectures by Irish professors regarding the historical, cultural, political, and economic underpinnings of the "Celtic Tiger". Also, sessions were scheduled that would enable students to discuss the interaction with the Irish in the marketplaces as well as the "craic" in the pubs.

Also it provided an opportunity for any student interested in gaining a cross-cultural experience in a European country where so many Americans have Irish heritage. There were directed studies each day where student teams pursued specific learning objectives. Some site visits were targeted for in-depth investigation, while other visits were for informational background and perspective. There was ample time to explore some of the historical aspects of Ireland. Some students chose to explore Great Britain and the European continent after the Irish program. Supplemented by our readings, observations in the marketplaces, site visits and informal discussions with the Irish people would lead to a thorough in depth study of an economy and society that has been enjoying an economic heyday.

BUILDING THE LEARNING STRUCTURE

The course was described as a series of lectures and field studies to explore the ancient and recent historical perspectives that have framed the Irish experience. In particular there were lectures on the political, cultural, and economic issues. Additionally, there was a primer on the myths and realities of the 'troubles' that have linked the Republic of Ireland with Northern Ireland, a part of Great Britain. Field visits and directed studies accomplished independently by student teams were ongoing over the two-week period in Ireland. This 4-credit hour course combined classroom activity (28 hours) with field studies (70 hours).

There was a required text, *The Celtic Tiger: Ireland's Continuing Economic Miracle* by Paul Sweeney plus two other required books, *Twenty Years A-Growing* by Maurice O'Sullivan and the *Eyewitness Travel Guide to Ireland* by Lisa Gerard-Sharp. Recommended enjoyable readings included Colleen Rice's *In the Midst of Darkness*, Peter McCarthy's *McCarthy's Bar*, and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. In addition to the readings, students had had a list of seven recommended movies.

CHOOSING THE TARGET COUNTRY

Ireland's recent economic surge makes it an ideal site for academic scrutiny. Ireland, about the size of Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire combined or about a quarter of the size of Colorado, is situated between the US and the European continent in a strategic position to be a significant player between the European and North American markets. Given its size, strategic location and the large number of Americans of Irish ancestry, this is the ideal country to base a study tour.

Upon completion of the course, each student was required to turn in a journal s/he compiled that would be a record of personal experiences and observations reflecting his/her understanding of how political, cultural, and economic events have contributed to the development of modern Ireland. To assist students in preparing and structuring these journals, a list of 13 questions was provided before the trip began. The journal would count for 40% of the grade while another 60% was based on the professors' assessment of students' participation in discussions, site visits, and knowledge of the assigned readings.

Ireland has become a vibrant, modern economy and the ideal base for foreign multinationals aiming to penetrate the European market. High tech and pharmaceutical firms such as Intel, Hewlett Packard, Dell, Pfizer, and Warner Lambert have established R&D, manufacturing and distributions bases in Ireland. However, for many Americans, Ireland is still perceived as a tranquil, rural backward country. This myth is exposed by the emergence of the "Celtic Tiger" economy. In a study of top decision makers of foreign companies, it was conclusive that the overriding reason for locating in Ireland was the availability of a highly qualified workforce, both staff and production workers.

Before membership in the European Community, Ireland came under heavy criticism from EU partners for producing too many students coached only in "unproductive" arts and humanities. The Irish government addressed this imbalance in university level education by investing heavily in the technological area. Prior to 1980, Ireland was producing a surplus of doctors, lawyers, dentists and other professionals. During this time, the common talk among parents in Ireland was of their children having to emigrate as soon as their education was completed to be sure of a reasonable livelihood. Irish society was losing the very people best equipped to reverse the country's declining economic fortunes;

those with the necessary capital, initiative and human skills. As those professionals emigrated, other countries benefited from the education provided, and largely paid for, by the Irish taxpayer.

Ireland has recently overtaken industrial powerhouse Germany in churning out super qualified scientist and engineers. The emphasis on technical education has become one of the key building blocks of the "Celtic Tiger" economy where graduates choose to stay in a prosperous Ireland. Additionally, for the first time ever, Ireland is now experiencing the bonus of returning native, Irish professionals.

One student wrote:

"The Ireland we were so fortunate to experience on our trip is a new and improved (economically speaking) Ireland; very different from the Ireland the world once knew. Over the past ten years, Ireland has literally transcended from the brink of being a third world country to become one of the European Union's strongest forces. Although the country is now witnessing wealth, technology and education, job opportunities, and immigration, Ireland now faces dilemmas that were once inconceivable. These issues include poor infrastructure, church corruption, fear of future instability and even racism." – J. Brundage

Ireland is an excellent place on the globe to set up a "classroom" to study the burgeoning market place of the Republic of Ireland. It provided a meaningful, hands-on experience for students to explore and to understand the economic surge that is sweeping the Republic of Ireland.

THE STUDENT BUDGET

The following information is based on 26 students in the program:

Tuition and Fees	\$510.00
Airfare	\$600.00
Transportation and Admissions in Ireland	\$200.00
Hostels	\$280.00
Meals	\$350.00
Education Fees	\$126.25
Contingencies	<u>\$100.00</u>
Total	\$2,166.25

The education fees covered the expenses of two faculty as well as the honorarium paid to eight Irish professors. Students were responsible for board, meals and transportation. Tuition and fees, contingency (unspent portion will be refunded to students) and education fee were paid directly to the college prior to departure.

A CHECKLIST OF PLANNING ITEMS

Many of these items could be sourced and completed via the Internet. Others, such as syllabus construction, are dependent on your professional skills. Preparation is as important an ingredient for success as are patience and leadership. The longest journey begins with the first step. In this case, that first step is developing a plan.

- Planning the itinerary
- Writing the syllabus
- Developing the reading & movie lists
- Estimating costs
- Recruiting -- Selling the program
- Lining up guest lecturers
- Contacts for transportation and lodging
- Developing curriculum to fit college criterion
- Student teams pursue learning objectives
- Universities in Dublin, Cork & Galway lectures by Irish faculty
- Prerequisites (juniors & seniors)
- Logistics of finding everyone and making all travel appointments and lectures/visits
- Meaningful, related activities
- Grading student achievement
- Evaluation of the adventure

ONE AUTHOR'S THOUGHTS: AFTER THE FACT

Following is some advice for those who might consider conducting a classroom without walls.

Punctuality. The need to be on time for travel and other activities is crucial because the tight schedule leaves no margin for error. The students were warned. "The bus (or train or boat) waits for no one. If you are not there when we leave, you will be responsible for your own transportation to the next destination on the schedule." The penalty for tardiness was explained to everyone before we left home. Anyone who was late for an activity on the agenda would be required to serenade the Irish lad or lass of his or her choice (opposite gender, of course) with an Irish song in the pub that evening in front of the rest of the group. This proved to be a severe enough punishment to discourage tardiness. There was only one close call that resulted in the culprit dashing onto the bus at the last minute before departure. Missing breakfast and having to sit with his duffle bag on his lap for the trip that day served as sufficient punishment in this case. For some reason, the thought of singing *Danny Boy* or *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling* to one of the locals in an Irish pub was not in the top ten of anyone's wish list.

Let's buy the professor a drink. With all the wonderful stouts and ales available, it was not uncommon for students and professors to retire to a local pub to enjoy the "Irish experience". For some reason, many felt a compelling need to buy a round for the "profs". There may be some merit to this from the student's perspective. As one of the authors recalls, many years ago this "rite of passage" (or was it *right to pass*?) was probably the only reason he got through a required statistics course at the University of Pennsylvania. The trick in these situations is to reconnoiter the pub upon entering so as to determine the location of the rest room and any nearby back door. Then enjoy an ale or two. While everyone is engrossed in conversation, head for the rest room; not an uncommon event considering the activity at hand. After a while, quietly, discretely and most importantly soberly, head for that secret preplanned escape route. As enjoyable as the camaraderie and libation might be, on an adventure such as this, sleep is a most valuable commodity. This ploy works like a charm and it seems that the gatherings proceeded perfectly well in this professor's absence.

Rise and shine. Running, jogging, or walking in the early hours of the morning is a wonderful way to experience an entirely unique view of a village or city. It is also a time when one can avoid vehicular or human traffic. For instance, Dublin at 6:00 am is completely different than it becomes two and a half hours later and remains for the rest of the day. A run down a secluded country road outside Dingle after a refreshing morning rain shower that leaves everything damp and cool cannot be duplicated. An added plus is that there is no one around to observe the strange site of an American runner calling out greetings over stone walls and hedgerows to the ubiquitous sheep grazing in rich green pastures. The runner returned to town just in time to observe youngsters on their way to school. This proved to be a fascinating opportunity to listen to snatches of conversation, thus gaining a different perspective of the personality of the region.

The times they have changed. When traveling with students and thus spending close to 16 hours a day in their company, one hears and observes far more than is necessary. This was a co-ed group. As a result, as might be expected, there were what appeared to be some budding romances. No matter how recently you left the undergraduate world as a participant, the times really have changed. Appearances are rarely what they seem to be any more, and we were better off concentrating on travel arrangements and accommodations than trying to figure out who was interested in whom. Daytime soap operas offer more intriguing and credible match ups.

Separate, but definitely not equal. In the interest of keeping finances within reason and to simplify accommodations, the professors shared the same hostels as the students, albeit not the same rooms (let's be reasonable) for the trip. The leader of the expedition had the foresight to book a bed & breakfast for the two authors mid trip down the street and around the corner from where the students were staying. What a blessing. Suffice it to say that different age groups need some time away from one another. And they most assuredly keep different hours.

CONCLUSIONS

At the finish of a marathon, the last thing a runner wants to think about is completing another marathon. The same could be said regarding a study tour such as the one described here. It is an exhausting, nonstop effort but certainly not without the reward of having finished an arduous yet exhilarating journey. Our students benefited from this hands-on opportunity as their horizons were expanded both literally and figuratively. They told us this much. We also were challenged to think differently and there is no doubt that our teaching strategies and methods will be modified as a result of the experience.

Just as is the case with a marathon, there is considerable preparation required long before the journey begins. The marathon (study tour) is really just the culmination of many months of preparation. Without the planning, this learning experience would not have been the success we felt it was for students and teachers alike. The best advice we can give to someone contemplating this type of adventure is to start developing your program as far in advance as possible. Every detail you attend to in advance and every contingency you can anticipate and plan for will pay off in a more smoothly run trip. There will always be surprises, so be flexible enough to adjust as the occasion demands. It is far better to have a plan and be able to adjust than it is to have a loosely structured agenda that changes on its own rather than with your supervision.

This was an experience that neither one of us would have missed and we know the student participants would agree with us. They learned a lot in a very short time frame. Much of what they learned, they probably didn't realize at the time. As this paper is being written, it has been almost five months since we returned. Would the students do it again – from all we have heard, most definitely (assuming of course another country was selected). Would we do it again six months from now – definitely not; 18 months from now — definitely.