

EVERY BRICK TELLS A STORY: STUDYABROAD AS AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE

Newell D. Wright, North Dakota State University

Val Larsen, James Madison University

Extended Abstract

Research on study abroad programs (SAPs) traditionally focused on logistics or the development of attitudes and skills. Less attention has been given to the subjective value of the participants' experience. This study focuses attention on that neglected topic. Drawing insights from an evolving genre of graffiti data and autodiving interviews, the study identifies dimensions of the SAP experience that cause participants to describe it as life changing and the best experience of their lives.

Schouten et. al (2007) suggest that such experiences might be described as a TCE, or "transcendental customer experience." TCEs are "characterized by feelings such as self-transformation or awakening, separation from the mundane, and connectedness to larger phenomena outside the self. TCEs may also be marked by emotional intensity, epiphany, singularity and newness of experience, extreme enjoyment, oneness, ineffability, extreme focus of attention, and the testing of personal limits" (p. 358). Certainly, the data reflect awakening, emotional intensity, newness of experience, extreme enjoyment, etc., that qualify this SAP as a TCE.

A related and equally applicable theory frame may be found in Arnould and Price's (1993) description of extraordinary experiences. According to Arnould and Price (1993), extraordinary experiences are "intense, positive, intrinsically enjoyable experiences" that entail "a sense of newness of perception and process" and are characterized by "high levels of emotional intensity" (p. 25) emerging from the dynamic interaction with other participants. Extraordinary experiences are spontaneous and unrehearsed, authentic, and lead to intense satisfaction and delight. They are life changing, self-defining episodes that are interpreted within the broader context of the consumers' lives. Service providers share the extraordinary experience with participants in an authentic and spontaneous way. Thus, these are not fully scripted service encounters.

Recent data demonstrate that the undergraduate study abroad experience has a stronger impact on participants' lives than anything else they do as undergraduates (including

coursework, athletics, student clubs, interaction with faculty, fraternities/sororities, etc. (Fry 2009). The findings of this paper provide additional support for Fry (2009).

This article discusses an SAP involving junior and senior level business and marketing students from a state university who participated in a semester-long experience in Europe. Students traveled to multiple countries over a 13-week experience as part of an undergraduate, semester-long business program in Europe. Approximately 46 % of the students were either marketing majors or minors, and two of the seven semesters were designed exclusively for marketing students.

The data for this study are unique: 200 graffiti left on a personal brick by departing students over the course of seven semesters. On the final day of the program, each student was allowed (but not required) to “leave a mark” on the program by decorating a brick in the stairwell of the residence hall using various colors of magic marker and paint. Two hundred students chose to leave a mark on the building and one student declined the opportunity. Each brick had been prepared with a coordinated theme by the faculty member in residence. Common elements included the semester, a background color, and artwork. Students had considerable freedom to include the most memorable elements of the SAP in their graffiti. Limited space forced them to distill the essence of the entire experience into a few lines of text and perhaps some images. The graffiti allowed students to become a permanent part of the SAP experience, to provide valuable feedback to program directors, and to directly influence the experience of students who followed them in the SAP.

The brevity of graffiti inevitably results in some messages being allusive and/or elliptical. To deepen understanding of the graffiti in the data set, thirteen depth interviews were also conducted with students who had participated in the SAP and left a graffiti.

Three principle themes emerge from the graffiti data used in this study: travel, magic moments, and community. The emergent themes discovered in this study fit neatly into the framework provided by Arnould and Price’s extraordinary experience construct. Travel to new and different places is intrinsically enjoyable and, when properly structured, tends to produce a sense of newness and emotional vividness during intense, emotionally charged positive social experiences that are spontaneous and unrehearsed and that lead to extreme enjoyment and delight. These extraordinary experiences are formed by the dynamic interaction of participants with service providers who share the experience in an authentic and spontaneous way. The many students who make superlative comments similar to the one above are clearly interpreting

the SAP within the context of their entire lives. In many cases, following Fry's (2009) logic, the SAP has marked their lives more profoundly than anything else they have done as undergraduates.

Since this is an abstract of an already published paper, the authors have made no attempt to maintain anonymity.

References available upon request