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Worldwide Wonder: The Positive Impact of Academic Travel on the Education Major

A Scholarly Personal Narrative

Kate Rutherford

During my time at Western Michigan University, I have been afforded the opportunity to travel throughout the world. I have completed short-term study abroad experiences in Ireland, England, Russia and Japan. I have traveled in the United States on a weeklong, intensive course, through “Study in the States” a travel program administered through WMU’s Lee Honors College. Academic travel is not often pursued in my major course of study. As I approach completing my degree in Secondary Education: English (with three minors in History Education, Global and International Studies, and Theatre), I have become far more aware of how the lessons that I have learned throughout my travels have impacted me as an educator. In this paper, I will outline just a few of the lessons that I have learned through my academic travels in Ireland, Russia, Japan, the US, and the UK.

I grew up in an incredibly homogenized community, and for years, I was comfortable with that. I was a part of a culture in which everyone around me identified as Christian, Euro-American, parochial, and the vast majority, as middle class. Perhaps one of the people that best fit the archetype of my community was my mother. So, I was surprised when she approached my dad and I with the idea of hosting an exchange student. Apparently, her co-worker had a side job placing exchange students, and she had convinced my mother to become a “welcome family” to one of the students to which she was assigned. Eventually, our place as a “welcome family” morphed into a full year commitment. Thus, my first experience with international cultural exchange began.

Michi came from Germany a month or so before I began my sophomore year of high school. We had both grown up only children, so neither of us were used to the complicated dynamics that are brought about by having siblings. In the next ten months, Michi became my best friend. She came to every play that I was in, and I attended her Catalina show and encouraged her after tough cross country practices. We went on a plethora of adventures over the course of her year in America, from ski trips to Walt Disney World. Even though Michi and I had grown up in different time zones thousands of miles apart, I found that we were far more similar than different.

Following Michi's departure from the United States, my dad and I began planning my first overseas adventure. After over a year of planning, we departed on a two week, whirlwind, tourist extravaganza to Europe where we visited the United Kingdom and France before meeting up with Michi and her family in Rome, Italy, prior to finishing our trip in Germany. It was on this trip that I became enamored with seeing the world. Prior to this trip, I enjoyed traveling in the way that most Midwesterners do... a vacation always proved to be a fun break from the norm. When I was able to see Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower, and the Roman Colosseum in person, however, it caused an unprecedented shift in my world view. I had always viewed these famous structures as an abstraction, they never seemed real to me. The realization that these buildings are more than just pictures in a book is what eventually helped me to establish a connection within my mind that the various people and events that I had seen on the news throughout my life, or read about in my history book, were more than mere fiction. Thus, this trip marked a pivotal turning point in my life.

From this point forward, I desperately wanted to see the world. One of the most important factors in determining which university I would attend was the strength of their study

abroad program. After selecting Western Michigan University, I decided quickly to apply to a pre-freshman study abroad program, and soon enough, I was on a plane to Ireland.

As my college career advanced, I took up every academic experience that I could in order to travel. Over the course of my time in university, I have embarked on three short-term faculty-led study abroads in Ireland, Russia, and Japan. I was also fortunate enough to participate in a “Study in the States,” a program through WMU’s Lee Honors College that allows participants to travel somewhere in the U.S. in order to achieve hands-on learning about a given subject. I was as well able to study at two universities in the United Kingdom, earning six college credits through The University of Cambridge and twelve credits through Manchester Metropolitan University.

I embarked on my college experience unsure of what profession to pursue, entering school as “undeclared.” After my first semester, I decided to declare a major in Secondary Education: English, and have never looked back. While I am unsure as to what will wind up ultimately being my career: k-12 teaching, policy creation in education, or a professorship, education has proven to be the right path for me, and is something that I am fervently passionate about. Helping students to form connections and gain insight into materials that can help them for the rest of their lives has been incredibly rewarding.

As my travel experiences began to accumulate, I began to reflect upon what made these experiences so incredibly rewarding. Not just in the personal sphere of my life, but also as a professional. The following pages will describe how studying abroad shaped me as an educator. They will provide an introspective look on my time studying in the United States, Ireland, Russia, Japan, United Kingdom. Each of these trips provided me with vital experiences that have

helped me to better both my pedagogical practices and my mindset as a teacher.

Research on the Subject

In a country where less than 2% of all university students (NAFSA, 2019) study abroad, those students that have taken the leap to explore life in a different country have boasted about the benefits that study abroad has provided them. Of this dismal number, education majors are often under-represented in the study abroad population, with most study abroad students being STEM, business, or social sciences majors (USAStudyAbroad, 2018). Therefore, research on the impact of study abroad on future educators is relatively limited.

While one survey found that although only 14% of students reported studying abroad, those who did often reported that the experience had a fundamentally positive impact on their undergraduate experience (Rivard, et. al), the scope of research that has been conducted in this field remains relatively specialized. Miami University has advocated for a short-term study abroad program specifically formulated for their education students (Shiveley & Misco, 2015) through demonstrating that students who partook in this program had increased cross-cultural awareness and job opportunity was marginal. The extent of this study however was limited to this particular program, and did not study the impact of any other study abroad opportunities on the populous of future educators. This is despite the fact that studies have shown that, even though short-term programs have a host of benefits (Smith & Mitry, 2008), year long programs have widely been held amongst study abroad professionals to have the greatest impact on students (Dwyer, 2004). The dearth of scholarship regarding the wide-ranging impact on all lengths of study abroad (short-term, semester-abroad, and year-abroad) specifically on education students was the foundation for establishing the necessity of this narrative. Whilst one can effectively argue that study abroad impacts all college students positively, especially in the

realms of job attainment and admission into graduate programs (Merced, 2019), it is much more difficult for one to produce benefits of study abroad specific to future pre-k-grade 12 educators.

To the Emerald Isle

“Just Do It!”

My story begins in Ireland. I was eighteen years old, and fresh out of high school. After applying for, and being accepted to my university's pre-freshman faculty led program, I grew incredibly excited to visit Ireland. I spent the summer after high school consumed with thoughts of my upcoming trip. After months of preparation, one day in late August, I found myself alone at an airport. It was then that I realised that I had never spent more than a few days away from my family before. I was scared beyond measure. I had spent the past several weeks overwhelmed with anticipation - and now, amongst a plethora of sunken eyed people roaming around the airport terminal, I was unsure as to whether I could even go. I had only been out of the country one time prior, having traveled with my dad. Most of my life, I had been surrounded by the invisible walls that border my small, homogenous hometown. I had developed the all-too-common sense of comfort with the familiar.

Despite my overwhelming discomfort, however, I could not help but feel a sense of comfort deep within my soul. I had heard many times over the course of my life to “trust my gut.” People can always tell you about the power of intuition, but it is something that can not be fully realised through the words of others.

Looking around the airport, I scanned the dark grey walls. People slumped over against them, asleep. A sea of people in chairs had their eyes locked on their phone screens, many of them with earbuds in, mentally transported elsewhere.

This was my last glance at the United States for the next three weeks. Nearly seven hours later, I arrived in Dublin.

Now, three years later, I have been fortunate enough to have lived outside of the United States for a full semester. I am applying to various government sponsored programs in order to hopefully, spend a gap year between undergraduate and graduate studies, living and working abroad. Currently, I can not imagine being so nervous to embark on a plane ride over the ocean, as this is now something that has become a routine part of my life.

It is hard for me to imagine myself without the unrelenting sense of independence that I have gained through traveling abroad. I live with a motto of seeking discomfort, as I have found that this is the easiest way to spark growth. This was not the case, however, when I, as a shy eighteen year old, hesitantly boarded my first plane overseas. Simply making the decision to go to Ireland, and then following through with this decision, is the single most powerful thing that I have ever done for myself.

As a teacher, I have learned an overabundance of pedagogical practices. I have taught in countless classrooms, many times shaking out of the nerves that come from being in an unfamiliar environment. That being said, I have trusted my gut as an educator. I have created some lessons that have made students laugh, and made students think. I value the advice of others who have more experience than myself, while simultaneously holding fundamental knowledge about my capabilities as an individual.

If I can get on the plane, I can take a leap of faith... I can teach the class, I can accomplish the task. If I gained one thing from studying abroad, it would be a belief in myself, a quality that is valuable both in the realm of teaching and beyond.

An Uphill Climb

After overcoming my initial fears of leaving the United States, I was overwhelmed with joy to be in Ireland. Exploring the streets of Dublin, and wandering Belfast, I was amazed by the natural beauty of the region.

The ease that I had begun to feel in Ireland took a quick turn, however, when my professor announced to the class that she would be spending her morning mountain climbing, and anyone who wished to could join her.

I had never been athletic. In fact, I was twenty pounds overweight and borderline asthmatic. Still, I desperately wanted to experience the trip in the fullest way possible, so, reluctantly, I said yes.

Arriving at the base of the hill with my classmates, my nerves culminated. I knew I would likely embarrass myself. Why did I think that I would ever be able to climb a mountain?! I could barely jog for half a mile. My classmates started up the hill with ease, and I followed, panting within the first few steps.

Slowly, I began to lose sight of my classmates. I was trying increasingly harder to keep up, only to fall further and further behind. When my professor, who was easily forty years my senior, had to stay back in order to help me, I became increasingly self-conscious.

Despite my embarrassment, I continued to journey up the hill. I was the last to reach the top of the hill, several minutes after my classmates. Even though my mind was consumed with embarrassment on the way up, my mind shifted when I finally reached the top.

Standing at the pinnacle of the mountain, I didn't care that I was red and sweaty, panting from exhaustion, with many of my classmates staring because I took so long. I had completed the climb, I had done it. Despite everything, I was overwhelmed with pride.

In the years to come, I would go on to lose thirty pounds, and am currently in the process of earning my certification in personal training. When I went mountain climbing again in Japan three years later, I was able to keep up with my classmates with ease. Still, when two girls had to stay back because they physically were unable to make the climb, my heart welled with empathy. Only a few years before, that had been me.

As I reflect on this experience, I realise that, as educators, we are going to have students that push us to our limits. We may also have an administration that is sub-par, and poor state policies put in place for guiding our practices. Teaching is a profession which stacks the odds against you - hence why the burnout rate is incredibly high.

Had I never gone abroad - and quite literally, climbed a mountain, I may have never recognized the worthwhile nature of productive struggle - especially in my field. I was irritated the entire way up the mountain, so focused on my struggle. Upon making it to the top, however, I was thriving, and have continued to do so.

A few years later, as a pre-intern teacher, I sat discussing a frustrating start to the school year with my mentor teacher. It was mid-October, and her contract had not yet been successfully negotiated. Special-ed students far below the grade level of the content that she was teaching were being placed in her classroom without her consent, and she had no clue how to best help them. Additionally, as a whole, her students seemed to be working at a level far below average. Frustrated, she had no clue what to do. Burying her head in her hands and collapsing on the desk in front of me, I will never forget the words that came out of her mouth “I just have to keep pushing on for my kids, it's always worth the climb, it's just hard sometimes.”

It indeed, is always worth the climb.

Rooting for Russia

Entering college, I did not expect to travel to Russia. Two years after my trip to Ireland, however, my lust for travel became insatiable. When the opportunity presented itself for me to study in Saint Petersburg, I could not have been more thrilled. This trip was filled with buildings straight out of the imagination and some of the best food that I have ever tasted, all amongst many of the most incredible cultural sites in the world. The trip did not entirely go as expected, but was one of the most astounding trips of my life.

A False Perception

Prior to the trip, I was bombarded with unwanted opinions about Russia and Russians. Most of the people who gave me these opinions were inundated with highly conservative news networks. I was told that Russians hate Americans, and that Vladimir Putin was “out to get us.” While I would agree that Putin probably is not the most ethical politician, almost everything else that I heard about Russians was simply wrong.

Upon first meeting with English speaking students at a Russian University, I was very nervous. Soon enough, however, I found that these students were very much like myself and my classmates.

One night, we all went out to dinner at a pizza restaurant. The pizza was amazing, but the friendships that were forged were even better. A couple of the girls and I bonded quickly, and a few days later, we sat at a coffee shop, giggling and talking about boy bands.

While I had always tried to limit my prejudices, I was shocked by just how similar we were. This was a lesson in itself that I took to heart - as an educator, we may hear things about certain students. We may not like every student - we may be annoyed by their attitude, or they may simply irritate us. That being said, if we look deeper, we may find that the students who we, or others around us, perceive to be the most different from ourselves, are actually the most like

us. This demonstrates the paramount importance of investigating student backgrounds and holding a keen understanding of who students are as people.

An Unexpected Twist

When walking through the streets of St. Petersburg, I unexpectedly felt a tug on the heel of my shoe. Thinking that someone had mistakenly stepped on the back of my shoe, I attempted to ignore it, until it occurred repeatedly. When I realised that someone was attempting to make me trip and fall on purpose, I furiously turned around.

When I confronted the man about his actions, he threw his lit cigarette at my face and retreated into a nearby building. The cigarette, luckily, missed my face but fell down my shirt, singeing my bra.

Furious and humiliated, I struggled to fathom what had just happened. I could not believe that someone who had no idea who I was would assault me on the street for no apparent reason.

I wish to make it clear that I do not believe that this man assaulted me because he's a "Russian who hates Americans." I believe that he was likely intoxicated, and this instance could have occurred in any large, metropolitan area.

The experience helped teach me to "roll with the punches" so to speak. Just like this man targeted me for no apparent reason, students will often also do this, especially when one is a brand new teacher, in order to "test the waters" and see how far they can push boundaries. It is important to not take these instances personally.

Be Flexible

Following my time in Russia, I was afforded the opportunity to visit Michi, who lives in Germany. Shortly after my arrival, Michi suggested that they we hike in the German country

Imagine the disappointment that welled inside of me when I became aware of the fact that the day that we were meant to go hiking, it was going to be not only hot and sweltering, but also raining. As the morning air approached one-hundred degrees fahrenheit, weighed down with humidity, it became clear that it would be a difficult day for Michi and I to attempt our hike.

As we debated whether to attempt the hike in the face of the weather, Michi's dad suggested that we go whitewater rafting with him instead, as he already had reservations to go. Michi and I decided to give it a go, after all, our hike would be extremely difficult.

Although I was initially disappointed, it was definitely worth our time. To make matters all the more interesting, I was the only person in my boat that did not speak German. Although this fact initially freaked me out, Michi explained this to the captain of our boat, who made sure to place me in the back of the boat, so that I could watch everyone else in our boat and emulate them for when I could not understand the directions.

I ended up having the time of my life whitewater rafting. I had to give up my initial plans just to be placed in a position where I was expected to obey instructions in a language that I knew almost nothing about. In the end, however, I had a day full of laughs and memories that will truly last a lifetime.

Sometimes, in teaching, we will be in situations where our plans are going to go awry. Additionally, teachers are often placed in situations in which they are confused - about general structure of the school day, about content, and about our students' lives. Working through this confusion can lead us to be more impactful, however, than we likely would be otherwise.

Living in the Land of the Rising Sun

After going to Russia, I had a newfound confidence instilled in me. It wasn't until I went to Japan that I truly was able to recognize what it is like to be a minority - I did not speak ANY Japanese when I first embarked on this trip. I also had very little idea about what the culture would be like. Sure, I knew a bit about anime and had heard that Japanese people were generally more soft-spoken, but generally speaking, I had no idea what to expect. For these reasons, Japan was my most impactful short-term study abroad. Separating oneself from what is known (in terms of language, food, religion, etc) as much as possible provides a truly unique experience.

The particular course that I completed in Japan was a course offered by the Comparative Religions department on Buddhism. The professor that led the seminar had previously been a Buddhist monk. As previously noted, I grew up in an extremely homogenized Christian community. Although, after experiencing more secular parts of Europe, I became more aware of those who grew up in a different religious context than myself, and generally became more accepting of different faiths, I never truly felt like I was in the minority. Even though much of Europe is currently secular, its Christian history means that many ornate churches can be seen throughout the continent, spanning well into Russia. In Japan, however, I was surrounded by a largely secular population that held some association to Shintoism and/or Buddhism. Shinto shrines for aborted children (as birth control is highly stigmatized in Japan, leading to abortion being strikingly common), not only provided a different perspective on religion, but also cultural relevance, providing me with a new perspective on a largely controversial topic in the US.

By exposing myself to those from different religious backgrounds, I became more keenly aware of my place in the world. As a teacher, I have become far more keenly aware of the various views that my students may hold, and why they hold them.

Faith in the System

Upon first arriving in Japan, I was in awe of the public transportation system. How could so many people travel by rail? Europe even pales in comparison.

As an American, I remember thinking that there was no possible way that the rail could be so effective. So when a friend and I decided to trek our way across the city to visit the Tokyo Skytree (the second tallest building in the world), we decided that Uber or a taxi would be the fastest and most effective way, despite being told countless times that public transport was the way to go. While the ride to the Skytree was expensive, we were able to get there fairly painlessly. On the way back, however, our Uber kept cancelling. My friend and I were in complete and utter panic, after all, we were supposed to be back at our accommodations, a temple, at nine. We eventually found a taxi, but we were several minutes late back to the temple. Luckily, they held the door for us, but goodness, I was absolutely mortified.

Within a couple weeks, I was traveling the country by rail: it was fast and incredibly efficient. If we had trusted the rail system, there was no way that my friend and I would have been late.

As teachers, this is something that we have to remember - we have to adhere to all sorts of aspects beyond our control - Common Core State Standards, administration, district-wide initiatives, etc. We can, however, be aware of the system that we work within, and know what works to help students, and what does not.

That is not to say that teachers should just blindly adhere to systemic injustices. Rather, it is to say that if a teacher is confused or frustrated at the school district, or a student, to try to deepen the understanding that they have of the given situation. When you are able to put aside yourself as having “better” solutions to problems than the rest of the world, you are able to better

understand people and why things occur the way that they do, even if this winds up serving as a reflection of a broken system.

“Blighty!” - Onward to England

My first time attending a foreign university was during a summer program at the University of Cambridge. Attending Cambridge was what fueled my excitement for my upcoming semester abroad the following year. There are a plethora of ways that Cambridge shaped me.

While the first few days in Cambridge were fun and carefree, they soon became more and more difficult. For the first time, I was put into a position where my final grade in each class was determined by a single essay.

This was a concept that was incredibly unfamiliar to me - in every other class I had ever handled, each of my grades had been determined by several pieces of work. While writing each essay in itself was difficult, perhaps what made it worse was the fact that I only had a week or so to write the essays for three courses following the short term classes.

The week that I had to write these essays was truly one of the most stressful of my life. I over-analyzed some aspects of my essays, and underanalyzed others. I proofread each essay several times over, and stayed up into the wee hours of the morning working to finish each of these essays. Finally, at the end of it all, I received the grades that destroyed my 4.0 GPA. Now, to clarify, they were not poor grades, on Western's grading scale, I earned two BAs and a B. Still, I was heartbroken, I was a straight A student - I was supposed to graduate Summa Cum Laude. I was ashamed of myself, I felt like a failure. And while I learned from the experience, I struggled to do better on my semester abroad a year later, consistently earning BAs. I found that I simply was unable to perform at my best under the United Kingdom's system of grading.

These experiences reminded me of the fact that all students are going to have a plethora of different learning styles that suit them, and so much of what learning style best fits them will be based on their particular life experiences and cultural backgrounds. As a teacher, I believe that the best thing that we can do for our students is to be aware of the variety of life experiences that they bring into the classroom, and how this may impact their learning. For example, a child who grew up in a different country, or possibly even just a different neighborhood, may have grown up learning in a far different way than many of their peers. Maybe they are more reliant on visuals, or maybe they are used to greater verbal response in the classroom. While teachers can never be expected to be an omniscient figure that knows about all cultures, it is our job to know about the general cultural background of our students, and differentiate accordingly.

Making a New Me - Manchester

When I first arrived in Manchester for a semester-long program, I had never been outside of the U.S. longer than a month. I left everything that I had ever known, everything that was familiar to me, in search of the unknown. What I found was, by taking a leap of faith and establishing my independence, I began to thrive. While I struggled academically on the British system, I was able to make new friends, meet new goals, and travel to a variety of new places. By detaching myself from my comfort zone, I was able to learn things about myself that I wouldn't have been able to otherwise. For instance, I was able to learn about the grit that I have as a significant other and the communication skills that I have as a daughter. I was also able to learn about myself as a teacher, that I am the kind of teacher who wants to give meaning to each lesson - to help students learn and grow as a product of their experience.

I can not pinpoint a single moment during this study abroad where I felt my most free. Perhaps it was going skiing on an indoor hill, struggling while trying CrossFit for the first time, or paragliding against the backdrop of mountains on a trip to Tenerife, Spain. Maybe it was going to the cinema on my twenty first birthday, and feeling free of the social pressure that I would feel in the U.S, so buying myself a milkshake, because I've known since I was seventeen that I despise the taste of alcohol.

Yes, I can go skiing and do CrossFit in the U.S. I can also paraglide, if I sought out a destination to do so. I generally have always refused drinks when they have been handed to me, both before my study abroad and after. So what makes my experiences during this time unique?

Everything I did during this study abroad, I did for myself. Being removed from my friends and family back home taught me how to be a self-advocate for not only what I want in a professional sense, but the experiences that truly bring me joy.

As a teacher - I hope that I can impose on my students to reach out and experience the world in a way that brings them joy. I can only do so much as a teacher, standing in front of them every day, trying to impart the knowledge that I have learned about content that they may well not remember twenty years from now. If I can teach my students to be a self-advocate for themselves, and the initiator of their experiences, then I have succeeded at my job.

Conclusions

Studying abroad is a deeply personal experience, the benefits of which are so plentiful that a paper of any length on the topic will never provide sufficient space in order to articulate them all. Studying abroad has taught me how to take the time to know a system or a culture, to roll with the punches, and to trust my gut.

Without the experiences that Western Michigan University has afforded me to travel the world, I would not be the person, or the educator that I am today.

Below, you can view a summary of the lessons that I have learned from studying abroad. There is not enough room amongst these pages to include them all, but that being said, I hope that you, as an educator, are able to take the lessons that I have learned around the world, and implement them within your own classroom.

To the future educators of the world - take the leap. Not just for the sake of your personal growth, but for the sake of your future students. What you will learn about how to interact with those who differ from yourself while studying abroad can not be taught in the best of methods classes.

Experience. Grow. Thrive...

Both in the world, and in the classroom.

6 Lessons for Educators that I Learned by Traveling the World

Kate Rutherford

1) Put in the Work!

While ironically, I am now pursuing a certification in personal training, nearly four years ago, I hated the idea of any kind of physical fitness. I was incredibly out of shape, and have always been borderline asthmatic. So, I should have known that I may embarrass myself when I decided to hike up a mountain with my professor and some fellow students during my first short-term study abroad in Ireland. I was the last one up the hill, and my fifty-something-year-old professor, who was trekking up the mountain with incredible ease, had to wait for my eighteen year old self, and even help me in a few situations. I was so embarrassed. The feeling that I had when I made it to the top of the mountain, however, was indescribable. I was SO proud of myself. A few months later, it was this journey that helped me to turn my life around. I started eating healthy foods and working out, and in less than four months, I shed thirty pounds that I have kept off ever since. When I went hiking up a mountain in Japan this past spring, I was easily able to keep up with the group. As an educator, I think that we need to use our strengths to be the best teachers possible. That being said, there are some things that are essential to your success that you are going to have to work for it. It will not be easy, but it will definitely be worth it.

2) We're All Human

Before I went to Russia, I was told by several people that it would be dangerous, and that Russians don't like Americans. With the exception of the guy that harassed me on the street, which again, could happen anywhere in the world, I only had positive experiences in Russia. In

fact, every person that I personally met was very kind. They had much more in common with me and the students that I was with than they did not have in common with us. One evening, a couple of girls invited me out to a small cafe, where we fangirled about boybands together. In the classroom, you are sure to have students from many different cultural backgrounds. Work to find that common ground with them... trust me, it exists, and your students will be forever grateful.

3) Roll with the punches

During my time in Russia, I was walking down the street when I felt something tugging at the back of my shoe. Thinking someone had stepped on it by accident, I didn't think much of it... until it happened over and over. Finally, I realised, for no evident reason, that the man behind me was purposefully trying to make me fall onto the concrete. Bewildered, I turned around to confront him. As I did, he threw his cigarette at my face, and stormed into a nearby strip-club. Luckily, the cigarette missed my face, but it fell down my shirt and singed my bra in the process. This happened to occur on a study abroad trip, but I would not dissuade people from going to Russia - it was one of the best trips of my life, and something like this could happen anywhere in the world. That being said, it taught me that sometimes, people, such as students and parents, will not like you due to no fault of your own. This is something that is common in the realm of teaching, and is not something that one should take personally or allow to impact their performance as a teacher.

4) Flexibility is Key

One of my faults as an educator is that I lack flexibility - I get frustrated when I have a "perfect plan" for the day, and the reality is that nothing about that plan comes to fruition. That being said, I have gained better flexibility as I have done more and more travel. Planes are delayed, prices are adjusted, and sometimes - things just don't work out. After studying abroad in Russia, I went to visit my former exchange student (and best friend) in Germany. While we were there, we planned on going on a hike in a beautiful mountainous region. Imagine my shock when it was going to be nearly 100 degrees fahrenheit, with rain, on the day that we planned to go. In place of the hike, her parents offered to bring us white water rafting in the middle of the country. I was irritated that our plans were cancelled, and although white water rafting did sound fun, I had no clue how I would be able to follow the directions to do it. I had never gone, and I speak almost no German. That said, my best friend explained this to the instructors, and they placed me in a place in the boat where I could easily watch (and emulate) other people. At the end of the day, I had an amazing time, which would have never happened if I refused to (quite literally) "go with the flow."

5) Faith, Trust... and Knowing What Works!

During a free night during my first week of study abroad in Tokyo, Japan, my friend and I decided to splurge on a fancy dinner at the top of the Tokyo Skytree, the tallest building in Tokyo and the second tallest structure in the entire world. We had a great night, but despite being told countless times to take the subway system, we decided to Uber since we were still relatively unfamiliar with the rail. We had a difficult time securing an Uber or taxi to get back to where we were staying, a temple that shut its doors for the night at 9PM. We arrived back at the temple at around 9:10 in total panic. Luckily, our professor had been kind enough to hold the door for us, but if he hadn't, we would have been stranded for the night. Over the course of the next month, I realised that the subway system is an incredibly easy, mindless form of transportation in Tokyo, and we would have easily made it back to our accommodations in time that night had we just trusted the system. In relating this to the realm of education, I don't want it to be implied that I am suggesting mindlessly having faith in a system that you do not believe in. Rather, I am saying, take the time to get to know your school district, fellow teachers, etc, before deciding that you can do something in a "better way" than they can.

6) Grades aren't everything

When I first came to college, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I only knew two things: that I wanted to pursue academic travel opportunities, and that I wanted to graduate Summa Cum Laude. For a long time, I was on track with this goal, successfully earning a 4.0 my freshman year. Throughout college, I had a few slip-ups, but never enough to send me under a 3.9 GPA. I was obsessed with perfection, even though I never considered myself a natural academic and had to work extremely hard to maintain my grades. Then, I took eighteen credits in England split between two different universities. My entire grade for each course was a single research paper, expected to be formulated in British English. While I did not do horribly by any means on these papers, they averaged a B/A on my university grading scale, or a 3.5, pushing my GPA down enough that I am graduating *just* shy of a 3.9 GPA. I spent a lot of time discouraged, feeling as if I had failed myself. If I hadn't studied abroad in England, then I would almost certainly be graduating at the top of my class. For a while, I grew resentful of my choice to study abroad. As time passed, however, I realised that I wouldn't sacrifice the experiences that I had for a perfect grade point average if my life depended on it. My time in England shaped me into who I am today, and gave me a whole new perspective on life. I think that, as an educator, this is something that we need to remember in regards to our students: oftentimes, a grade is seen as a motivator for success in the eyes of students. Although most teachers want intrinsic motivation for their students, the motivation that a grade provides simply can not be changed in our current system of education. That being said, if we provide the right kind of experiences for our students, and place greater emphasis on pushing them to grow as a person, rather than achieving a specific grade, we are doing our job as educators.

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