



SHOOTING GLOBAL: An Essay on Meeting Outcomes with Experiential Teaching Abroad

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Abstract

During three consecutive summers, Marie Barnas served as the faculty advisor for a study abroad trip to Ireland where undergraduate Mass Media students could experience producing a documentary on location overseas. This past year, study abroad was challenged further with the onset of Covid and the canceling of programs. Even if you ironed out all of the wrinkles for a trip for media students abroad, most study abroad programs canceled those itineraries due to travel restrictions and safety precautions. In this article, we would like to share with you how we ran a successful program from getting it started to getting the most out of the media artifacts collected by our students for use on their resumes after graduation.

Keywords: Study abroad; International education; Film and video production; Educational outcomes; Assessment; University strategic plan; Student travel; Faculty-led travel; Mass media; Covid-19

Introduction

Crafting study abroad programs for any group of university students is not for the faint of heart. All international programs battle logistics for student affordability, the complexities of moving a group of students from point A to point B, which countries are accessible and appropriate for your students, how to make the experience worthwhile educationally, and how to prove academic viability and where the program would fit into the current program's curriculum.

Media study abroad trips face even greater challenges. The gear considerations alone are daunting, as size, weight, reliability and portability all take on new importance. Coordination is doubly difficult with transportation and luggage size considerations beyond the scope of other academic programs. Finally, the choice of location is paramount; is the host country English-speaking, is it accessible with few stops at airports, and are there subject materials worthy of an international trip where students will want to do filming while abroad?

This past year, study abroad was challenged further with the onset of Covid and the canceling of programs. Even if you ironed out all of the wrinkles for a trip for media students abroad, most study abroad programs canceled those itineraries due to travel restrictions and safety precautions. Now, with the possibility of a dip in enrollment post-Covid, the attractiveness of a new study abroad trip for your media program may be something to invigorate and recharge students who are looking for more than just taking classes. In this article, we would like to share with you how we ran a successful program from getting it started to getting the most out of the media artifacts collected by our students for use on their resumes after graduation.

Background

During three consecutive summers, Marie Barnas served as the faculty advisor for a study abroad trip to Ireland where undergraduate Mass Media students could experience producing a documentary on location overseas. Prior to that, her colleague (and now-husband) Frank Barnas had designed an academic program titled International Documentary Production (IDP). The evolution of IDP to a successful study abroad program is instructional in that it shows how dormant academic courses can fit into new administrative goals.

After enveloping IDP into the study abroad program, and then supervising three successful international trips, we analyzed the aggregate effects on us as faculty and on the students who participated. Our aim in this article is three-fold: to discuss the pros and cons of such an experience for students in programs where field production is a key component of the curriculum and students are producing media content, to provide a framework

for developing a similar program at your institution, and to share our personal experiences as we built the program and led the experience over three years. Now at Middle Tennessee State University, we will be offering a study abroad experience to Ireland as well as take part in a study abroad trip to Israel next summer using everything we have learned and are sharing with you here.

Planning

Frank had previously developed a degree emphasis in International Documentary Production (IDP) within the Mass Media program of study. IDP consisted of courses in field production, coupled with a foreign language requirement and coursework in cultural anthropology. While a number of students expressed interest in producing documentaries in international settings, the courses in foreign languages and cultural anthropology proved problematic for several reasons. One potential course in cultural anthropology went unoffered for several semesters, students found that the foreign language courses would eat into their unrestricted elective hours, and the lack of faculty oversight in an overseas setting proved unnerving for undergraduates. Several students successfully completed IDP, but low enrollment eventually led to the deactivation of the program. However, the capstone course of International Documentary Production remained as a dormant part of the university's catalog.

Several years later, Marie developed a working relationship with the university's Center for International Programs (CIP). This robust center coordinated numerous study abroad options, but none specific to Mass Media. She set to work in creating a study abroad option, communicating its value to the academic program, department, and college. After creating the buzz in her academic unit and receiving the blessing of the mid-level managers on campus, she met with the CIP to start the paperwork for approval at the Provost's Office.

There are challenges at each stage: colleagues question why they aren't involved in the development, new mid-level managers try to impose their visions on its design, and the CIP remains skeptical of your ability to safely lead and manage a group of college students abroad for the first time. At the Provost's level, there are budgetary concerns for how to pay faculty who lead the trips and whether students can afford the experience. The viability of what seems like a no brainer for serving students in your program becomes fraught with issue after issue the more you push forward. It is at this point, when all the flaws are exposed, that you either cave or charge forward. We charged forward because in the end, we believed this program was the best thing for our students in the Mass Media program. Here are some of the specific examples of what went wrong along the way:

- Our initial proposal was denied due to a lack of justification (whatever that means) for the course.
- We were advised to work with another program on campus and just put our students on their study abroad since we lacked experience. That program was Biology.
- We were instructed to partner with the Honors College and have our students take a class in their curriculum for credit on the trip (we had previously collaborated with them in an effort to connect with a host institution in Ireland).
- Our budget was denied as the price point was too low.
- Our trip time was too short.
- Our proposal indicated that we wouldn't be utilizing a traditional classroom for instruction so there was a concern that the course outcomes would not be met.

Overcoming Obstacles

We designed the trip to be nomadic in nature, meaning we would travel all around Ireland to get footage and develop documentary style projects as we experienced the culture. Staying in one place for a longer amount of time, which is what traditional study abroad trips usually deliver, was not desirable for how we wanted to teach documentary production, nor was it what the students really wanted – most media or film and video students want to film new places and they want to see new things every day. Therefore, the purpose of our trip was three-fold: to give our students the opportunity to experience another country as fully as possible through real-life immersion, to provide an option to the traditional classroom through experiential learning in the field abroad, and to teach adult skills through the experience of travel. Film and video students or students in media programs love to practice filming, but some of them had never traveled or had experience filming on location. Hence, we set out to justify our choices and resubmit our proposal. Fortunately, our university had just released a new strategic plan that we felt our study abroad program fulfilled:

- To prepare students as leaders in a global society
- Include students in discipline-based inquiry and disseminate their research
- Promote professional development and collaboration at the university and beyond
- Increase applied learning opportunities in diverse learning environments
- Evaluate course delivery methods and shorten time to degree

- Promote a diversity rich student-centered environment
- Increase activity and involvement of students internationally

This was great news as our study abroad would now be the first of its kind in Mass Media that met the objectives of the new strategic plan. Our unique experience afforded our students the opportunity to build skills that are global, diverse, and self-sustaining, which are attributes that media industries expect from potential employees. We thought it would be a great idea to link the students directly with the University's goals and the course MDIA 4963 International Documentary Production was approved upon a second submission of our proposal.

Development of the Trip

They say why reinvent the wheel, don't try to fix it if it isn't broken, and don't challenge the status quo. We hear these mantras as faculty who have new ideas about what we can offer our students; we are the ones in the trenches working with them on a daily basis and we strive to improve upon the conventional ways of doing things. But, as all of us who teach learn very quickly, this is sometimes at the behest of our academic peers. What we find is that it is easier to copy and reuse age old techniques as we teach students year after year. At least this way we can ensure that we are moving forward. But what we really wanted to do with this study abroad was allow students an opportunity to learn on the job to meet their learning objectives beyond the confines of the traditional classroom setting.

The class was originally designed to allow students to use their skillsets to shoot documentary productions in Ireland using a host institution to help arrange travel and lodging. It was geared toward individual students who sought a non-traditional capstone experience. It was described as an upper division workshop type of class in the curriculum. The students would receive credit while studying abroad, ending the class with portfolio materials for employment after graduation. Students could meet their outcomes by producing short pieces for submission to the Broadcast Education Association and by adding this material to their demo reels. Because of our study abroad offering, students would have materials that showed hands-on acumen plus international experience.

A Strategic Plan

The problem then was to find a media course that would allow students to participate in a study abroad experience and also give them credit within the major. Because MDIA 4963 had been dormant, we re-evaluated its description and found that it matched up nicely with the goals of offering such an experience. The goals were twofold; one, it would help students get early production credit out of the way, and two, it would provide them with unique portfolio materials produced outside of our own environment. Both of these things can set graduates apart in the job search after graduation and shorten their time to degree.

Frank was awarded a Curriculum Development scholarship to assess the requirements of revamping the class from the VPAA's office to track the progress and make changes for subsequent offerings of the trip and class. As Program Chair at the time, Marie pushed hard for a curriculum audit that was eventually started and completed. The results ended in the program tweaking some of the course descriptions to allow for better measurement of the outcomes, all of which are geared toward employment after graduation for our students in media industries. Course prerequisites, assignments, and outcomes are planned and reported on every year, and MDIA 4963 was reawakened as a study abroad course that was offered to Mass Media students at any level whether they are beginning or upper division students. Offering an upper division course to incoming Media students helped build a culture of productivity, professionalism, and collaboration, all of which are very important traits in the media industry and for the culture of the program.

Because media production jobs are highly collaborative, beginning level students could be paired up with upper division students, and through the experiential nature of their work, freshman media students were able to get ahead of the curve in completing viable portfolio materials for use in their upper division classes and after graduation. In all, the students produced three projects in three years, two award winning projects in three years, and a website, testimonials, a slideshow, panoramic videos, and day-by-day accounts of their experiences abroad. Their work was professional, engaged, and worthwhile.

Execution

The original plan was to offer a study abroad experience to media students in an effort to get them materials for graduation and for employment with the added bonus of fulfilling the strategic initiatives of the university. We decided to offer a Mass Media specific study abroad because several Media students had asked for the opportunity and we felt we were serving the students by accomplishing this request. The biggest reflection we have had is in the difference in the projects each year.

Year One

In year one we worked very closely with the students to produce a viable project. We first asked them to come up with an idea of their own, but since none of them had been to Ireland before, they really struggled with this stage. We researched social media for subjects trending in Dublin and located a topic that appealed to the students. After that, the students struggled with how to put that story into visual form using on location filming techniques; most of them had only shot news packages in the field and none had produced more cinematic documentary style filmmaking or shot outside of the studio. As the professors of this first-time group, we found ourselves producing the entire project as we did not want them to fail and we wanted them to come away with a project that would benefit them after graduation.

Eventually, we wrote the script, set up the meetings with the locals for the students, instructed them on the production aspects, and led them through post-production where we helped them organize an intro, outro, find royalty free music, and edit all the segments together. Essentially, we became the producers for the project while the students took the rest of the credits like directing, editing, cinematography, etc. We even gave them some footage from an entirely separate project we had shot in Ireland to fill in some crucially needed b-roll they lacked. In the end, because we were working with this particular group of first-time students on this trip, this was the best way to complete a viable project while still having a rewarding and fun study abroad experience.

While gearing up for the next summer's trip, we received some feedback from our colleagues on our first trip. As the student project was winning some awards, there was some question about the roles we played as instructors and how much material was shared. In the total finished running length of the student project, approximately 5% of it was our own footage that we shared with them to so they could finish their last segment of the project. In return, the students shared with us about 1% of their footage to help with one of the segments of our own faculty project. We credited them in our documentary, and they credited us in their project. Still, other faculty were confused and in the end some accusations were made that we stole the student footage even though the footage they were referring to had been shot exclusively by us. In the end, both projects went on to win awards and we pushed ahead with a second study abroad trip, albeit with a different approach to the filming aspect.

Year Two

Since we now had projects that we could use as examples for the students in the second trip, we decided that this group would be solely responsible for all aspects of pre-production, production, and post. We would be completely hands off and allow them to either have a total success or horrible failure. We would not take any credit for producing or helping them execute anything on their own. As the instructors this year, we wanted to make sure we were completely hands-off but we did help them troubleshoot which equipment to use and gave them some producing and directing instruction that they could choose to implement or not. This time we did not have a hand in making the project with them at all. We let them organize the production on their own, find a story and build it of their own accord, pick their crew roles, and coordinate their post-production meetings to finish the editing when we returned. Overall, their project turned out okay, but it was not of the caliber of the first year. The group struggled with students assigned to roles and not doing their jobs as they lacked a strong producer, plus the story felt discombobulated and unorganized as it was lacking in adroit storytelling technique. This was likely because the director was also doing the job of producer because that student wasn't pulling their own weight.

Lastly, the editing was a bit messy because they didn't record enough b-roll in the field; this was also a problem with the first year's group.

The second year project was entered into the same competitions as the first year but did not win any awards. The lesson we took from this was that the second year was more closely indicative of a typical student project that we had encountered in all our classes on campus, making us question if this was a good approach. We decided we needed to find a good sweet spot between these first two experiences as we wanted to keep the goal of



having award winning projects for the students when they graduated, but also not hold their hands so much during production. As we all know, group dynamics can be difficult for college students who often bite off more than they can chew. Even though the second year's group produced a flawed project, we still found solid motivation in trying to accomplish a great trip and getting the students some awards out of their efforts. We again tried a new approach in year three since we now had two years of experiences to contemplate in setting up the next trip. We had been working with the same university in Ireland and knew even better all the logistical elements of travel, so we were hopeful to try a new approach. For the third year we were more selective of who went on the trip and that worked well for finding the sweet spot we sought.

Year Three

In the fall semester of the third year, we decided to use a formal application process for going on the trip. Students who were interested filled out a questionnaire and explained why they wanted to go on the trip, what they intended to accomplish with the experience, and what role they felt would benefit a group production project. Using this information, we selected a crop of students who would put in the effort of making a project in the field while abroad, who would take the experience seriously, and who were generally more studious. As previously noted, we initially created the trip for upper division students but also opened it to lower division students to get the trip off the ground. However, we now wanted to know more about their grades, collegiality, and drive. In this third year, with a huge pool of students from all levels of classification, we now had the ability to decide who would go on the trip. This competitive nature resulted in a group of students that were much more academically rigorous and made for a much more earnest culture. Our traditional cap of 20 students was overloaded with 35 applicants. This was a great problem to have as our trip had garnered such buzz and become so successful that now it was a popular experience with the students. Plus, we liked the fact that it had become competitive so that the projects would continue to improve each year.

After narrowing down the pool of students that would go in the third year, we started a series of preproduction meetings with them in the spring semester. This was a luxury since the first two years were taken up with administrative meetings about travel, budget, and our roles as study abroad advisors. But now that we had all of that under our belts, we could focus on the project before we left in May. This made all the difference in finding that sweet spot we mentioned before; the extra time we had to mentor the students while they came together as a group and married their production topic was beneficial to having a successful trip and final production project. Because of the extra time, this group could use us in an advisory capacity without producing their project for them. The time flexibility also allowed thoughtful discussions before the time crunch often experienced in the field.

In this third year, the students wrote their own script, crewed themselves up, went into production on location without incident, and planned ahead and executed post production perfectly. We gave them little insights while they were scripting, filming, and editing that helped them during the production process while they communicated their vision and held true to that all through principal photography. It was a mature group of students that grasped the seriousness of production and knew when to stick to their guns creatively yet were open enough to solicit our advice as desired. Post production ended with a project that went on to win the most awards of all three years. Overall, this was the best year for the trip we had created and the perfect balance of instructor-student interaction for a production based study abroad trip.

A Look Back

This trip was cancelled after three successful years because, like at many institutions, the administrative dynamic changed and our Ireland study abroad program was seen as something that was not beneficial to the students. The students, in general, were devastated as there now was a long line of students still waiting to go and wanting the experience. We also wanted to keep taking students and making projects with them as this trip taught them so much more than production – the soft skills needed to troubleshoot things proved to be especially beneficial for each group of students we were able to take those three years. Students were learning skills pertaining to time management, adaptability, cultural and worldly awareness, problem solving, new perspectives, what it feels like to be a minority, how to deal with uncertainty, work with foreign technology, try to communicate in another language, a loss of ego and an increased sense of humbleness, and most importantly, self-awareness.



Looking back, there isn't anything we would change in terms of the growth of the projects from year to year but there are some administrative challenges we would have done differently. For example, we should have opened up the trip to more faculties in other areas to take their own groups of students with them but alongside our group so that it couldn't have been so easily canceled at its peak. We likely also could have incorporated a traditional classroom setting into the trip and finished postproduction before returning. That would have ensured a longer trip that kept the students focused after production as some of them were not as engaged upon coming back to the US in the first two years. Our overall trip time could have been longer making the nomadic nature of the trip a bit easier and would have allowed our host institution to plan more excursions off-campus plus some on-campus interactions with Irish students.

We have come across several other programs both regionally and nationally through interactions with our peers at academic conferences and meetings. We noted the strong faculty involvement and the importance of a study abroad experience for students who wanted to experience production abroad. We did this little experiment with these three years, extracted the best parts of it, and turned it a one-of-a-kind trip tailored for media production students that can easily be replicated in film and video or other media programs. Of course, we would have loved to see what different approaches or results, if any, another year or subsequent years would have garnered.

Now at a new institution, Middle Tennessee State University, we have been asked to start taking film and video students abroad again, and this time there is much more flexibility in the planning and execution of the trip by faculty members. We will use what we learned in the past to make this and other student abroad trips that we create and execute at MTSU the best they can be to serve the students in our department while also having a bit of fun.