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"I'm Here as a Guest in Your System": Exploring the Complexities of Local Faculty Teaching Visiting U.S. Students in Study Abroad Contexts

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Abstract in English

As primary architects of the 'global classroom,' local faculty who teach visiting U.S. students at study abroad centers across Europe play a critical role in the study abroad experience. This article draws on theories of commodification in study abroad as well as transformative learning theory to unpack how and why local faculty bend to the U.S. higher education system in their work. Drawing on interviews with eight local faculty teaching at four different study abroad centers in Florence, Italy, the article explores what motivates Italian PhD-holders to teach in study abroad centers and to deal with the precarity of securing that work. The article also explores classroom-based challenges related to cultural differences and student expectations, as well as the methods local faculty employ to overcome them. The article concludes with a discussion of how market-driven priorities in study abroad interact with pedagogical decisions in ways that undercut the best ambitions of international education.

Abstract in Italian

In qualità di protagonisti principali della cosiddetta "classe globale" ("global classroom"), i docenti locali che si rapportano con gli studenti statunitensi presso i centri accademici esteri sparsi in tutta Europa svolgono un ruolo cruciale nei programmi di studio all'estero. Questo articolo fa uso delle "Theories of

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Commodification in Study Abroad" e "Transformative Learning Theory" per analizzare come e perché i docenti locali sembrino adattarsi al Sistema accademico statunitense nello svolgimento del loro lavoro. Basandosi su otto interviste a docent locali attivi in quattro diversi centri accademici esteri a Firenze, Italia, questo articolo esplora le motivazioni che inducono i Dottori di Ricerca italiani a insegnare in tali contesti e ad affrontare la precarietà lavorativa connessa a tali posizioni. Inoltre, vengono indagate le sfide derivanti dale differenze culturali e dalle aspettative degli studenti, nonché le strategie adottate dai docenti per superarle. L'articolo si conclude con una discussione su come le priorità dei programmi di studio all'estero, guidate dalle logiche di mercato, influenzino le decisioni didattiche fino a compromettere le ambizioni di eccellenza nell'educazione internazionale.

Keywords

Culturally responsive teaching; education abroad; faculty roles; host community; pedagogy

1. Introduction

Each year, tens of thousands of U.S. students journey to Europe to fulfill their dreams of studying abroad. Some come for the architecture, the food, or the cobblestone streets, but all come with high, and often quite specific, expectations for their experience. These eager students are received in dozens of cities across the continent by local study abroad faculty and staff who are responsible for turning those students' dreams into reality. This is, of course, a very tall order, especially as the average duration of study abroad programs has decreased significantly in the past decades, with 67% of all study abroad students in 2021/2022 spending less than a semester abroad (IIE, 2023). This means that students' experiences, and how they will judge the value of the investment that they have made in the internationalization of their education, is determined by those few weeks or months in their destination. When we consider how this differs from the task of curating a meaningful undergraduate experience over the course of four years as part of an undergraduate program on a U.S. campus, the pressure faced by local study abroad administrators and faculty seems all the starker.

Whether their work is based at a study abroad center, U.S. university branch campus, or local university that hosts visiting students, local study abroad administrators and faculty are simultaneously educators, cultural liaisons, linguistic translators - and sometimes, as one Center Director shared

with me “pseudo-therapists, security analysts, caterers, drivers, and plumbers”. In no other educational setting are professionals expected to wear so many hats (Robinson, Doughty, et al., 2025), while not only straddling two or more national cultures, but also constantly negotiating between priorities set by their, often U.S.-based, campus or provider organization central office and realities on the ground. The entire study abroad enterprise hinges on the work of local study abroad administrators and faculty who *produce* the “global classroom” (Ficarra, 2019).

For this reason, scholars and practitioners of education abroad should be keenly interested in the experiences of local administrators and faculty. However, to date, there has not been substantial research conducted on this constituency. Despite growing attention to the impact of study abroad programs on host communities (Haeger et al., 2024; Mogford & Lyons, 2019; Wood et al., 2012), much of what we know about the challenges faced by on-site study abroad faculty and staff is anecdotal. In an attempt to fill this gap, Robinson et al. (2020) administered a survey to 218 resident directors in Europe to better understand their contributions and challenges. They reported issues related to work-life balance, disconnect challenges with home institutions, navigating US-Europe cultural differences, and managing expectations of both the home office and students. Given the centrality of local staff to the study abroad endeavor, research like this fills important gaps in the broader literature that seeks to capture the administrative infrastructure of U.S. study abroad programs (Dietrich, 2018).

However, in addition to Resident Directors and local study abroad staff, another important on-site constituency that is not well represented in the current study abroad literature is that of *local faculty* - that is, faculty who are from, or reside in, the host destination and are responsible for in-classroom instruction of visiting U.S. students. While there is significant literature on the experiences of the U.S.-based faculty who lead short-term study abroad programs (deLusé & Thomas, 2022; Fisher et al., 2023, Romero-Hall, 2020) these studies don’t typically focus on classroom-based learning and often involve faculty and students who share common academic cultural norms. The nuance of what it is like to teach *visiting* students, in *your own* country, while working for a U.S.-based university or study abroad provider is something quite different altogether. It is that specific experience, and gap in the current literature that this article seeks to address.

While there are many aspects of local faculty life that deserve attention, this article will focus specifically on the challenges of their work in the study abroad context. I will explore this topic through the lens of Florence, Italy - which hosts over 50 U.S. college and university study abroad centers. Because of the city's modest size, relative to other popular European study abroad destinations (like Barcelona, London, and Paris) the study abroad academic labor market here is also smaller, which introduces both challenges and opportunities for local faculty employed by study abroad centers. While this article uses Florence as a case study, the goal is to explore issues related to the practice of cross-cultural teaching and student support that are relevant to study abroad classrooms across Europe, and indeed the world, where local faculty find themselves navigating the complex terrain of teaching across cultural, linguistic, political, and sometimes socioeconomic difference.

I will begin by laying out a two-part theoretical framework that attends to both the forces of neoliberalism and the commodification of study abroad that mediate faculty's entry into the field of study abroad as well as the decisions that they make about teaching and learning once they are in the classroom. I will then describe my research methods, the larger dissertation study from which this data is drawn, as well as my positionality in relation to this work. From there, I will introduce a set of findings organized around three primary themes: 1) the precarity of employment as an Italian faculty member, 2) challenges that arise in the classroom, and 3) "bending" to the U.S. educational system. I will conclude with a discussion of the implication of these findings and how they point to the importance of including local study abroad administrators and faculty in the development of study abroad practice and policy.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

There are both macro and more micro theoretical frameworks that can help contextualize this exploration of the local study abroad faculty experience in a European study abroad context. On the macro level, I want to draw theoretical attention to the commodification of study abroad programs and how some of the precarity experienced by local faculty is tied to broader neoliberal trends and market forces in higher education. On a more micro level, I want to highlight theory that gives rise to culturally responsive teaching, as I think, in some ways, this is what local faculty are attempting to do when bending to the expectations of the U.S. academic system. Both the macro conditions that enable Italian faculty to be teaching U.S. students outside of Italian universities in the

first place and the theory that might explain psychologically and pedagogically what is happening in those classes on a more micro level will be considered here.

2.1. Commodification of Study Abroad

The nature of study abroad programs have followed along broader trajectories of neoliberalism and corporatization within U.S. higher education (Bolen, 2001; Goldoni, 2023; Kortegast & Leilani Kupo, 2017). And when study abroad programs are positioned as market commodities, students become customers and international educators become shopkeepers. The educational "product" then, is highly sensitive to the real and perceived desires of the student consumer, and not necessarily to the broader goals of the international education endeavor. However, because the goals of international education - like increasing mutual understanding and cross-cultural exchange, remain central in study abroad discourse and policy, providers of study abroad programs have to simultaneously attend to both the desires of the student consumer *and* to operationalizing pedagogical goals that may run counter to those desires. For this reason, commodification theory offers a useful framework within which the experiences of local faculty teaching in study abroad contexts in Europe can be considered.

2.2. Culturally Responsive Teaching

As I will explore in the section to follow, there are several precarities of being a local faculty member, teaching visiting U.S. students, in a European study abroad setting. However, as I will use the data to illustrate, teaching U.S. students in a classroom-based setting is one that new faculty do not always find themselves well prepared for, especially if their PhD training was within a European context. This is exacerbated by both the pedagogical expectations of the U.S. based campus or study abroad organization that employs local faculty to teach in study abroad settings, as well as by the students themselves. Especially within a competitive, market-driven study abroad context, in which several study abroad centers are competing for U.S. students, the satisfaction of those students - both inside and outside of the classroom becomes important for program leadership to consider.

Cultural Mismatch Theory (Stephens et al., 2012) provides an explanation for why U.S. students might be resistant to adapting to local academic cultures and pedagogical methods. It argues that when the culture of an institution, or classroom, differs greatly from a students' home culture, this causes distress and can lead to a lack of academic engagement. The theory is

typically applied in the context of U.S. schools and classrooms, where historically marginalized students are most often taught by instructors from non-minoritized identity groups and gives rise to the now best practice of "culturally responsive teaching" or CRS (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2017). CRS leverages students' lived experiences and perspectives as an important form of knowledge and allows students to see themselves represented in what otherwise may feel like foreign academic spaces. I argue that what many Italian instructors report doing, within the study abroad context, is a version of culturally responsive teaching — in that they are actively altering their teaching methods in order to increase students' feeling of comfort, and safety, and attempting to make their classroom feel less foreign and unnerving.

However, this pedagogical instinct, or administrative directive, may be misguided given the inverse relations of power that operate in a study abroad classroom, wherein visiting U.S. students hold a great deal of economic and cultural power (Ficarra, 2021), and many faculty teaching within study abroad programs experience a great deal of precarity and job insecurity - i.e. lack of power. While this happens in the U.S. as well, especially at universities that rely heavily on non-tenure track teaching faculty, the situation is particularly acute in study abroad settings in Europe where many local economies rely heavily on the presence of visitors, including students.

Transformative Learning Theory (Chwialkowska, 2020; Mezirow, 1978) would suggest that the discomfort that students might experience by having to adapt to local pedagogical methods, employed by European faculty, is not only desirable but necessary to cause a "disorienting dilemma" which pushes students to grapple with new ways of knowing. This aligns with Senninger's (2000) *Learning Zone Model*, which purports there to be three zones - the Comfort Zone, which is a safe place to rest, but not a lot of learning happens here. It is when we push through the comfort zone to the Growth or Learning Zone, which requires some level of discomfort, that we stretch ourselves in ways that enable us to accept the challenge of new learning. However, stretched too far, we end up in the Panic Zone, in which we experience so much discomfort and distress that we are demotivated and closed down to learning. Many local faculty acknowledge that for some students, being in a new country is already a stressful and disorienting experience and so expecting them to conform to local methods of teaching and learning would push them into this Panic Zone.

3. Methods

The data for this article is drawn from my dissertation study titled Producing the Global Classroom: Exploring the Impacts of Study Abroad on Host Communities in San Jose, Costa Rica and Florence, Italy which aimed to draw attention to the experiences of *intentional* study abroad hosts - defined as local administrators, faculty, and host families, as opposed to *unintentional* hosts, such as neighbors and local business owners, in two different study abroad host community contexts. Florence was chosen as one of the two case studies because of the volume of U.S. students studying within a relatively small historic city center and because of the high volume of U.S. colleges and universities operating campuses there. I conducted 35 in-depth interviews with local study abroad administrators, faculty, and host mothers over an 8-week period in Florence, in 2017. Those interviews were transcribed and coded inductively, and then codes were collated using supporting data. Codes were grouped into themes, which were then reviewed and revised with input from interview participants. For the purposes of this article, I focus primarily on the eight interviews with local faculty. Of these eight faculty members, two were men and six women. They ranged in age from 35 to 70, and all of them held a terminal degree in their field. They were employed by one of four different study abroad centers, two were U.S.-based universities, one was a U.S based study abroad provider organization, and one was an independent study center catering primarily to visiting U.S. students. The names of the individuals interviewed as well as the organizations for which they worked are anonymized here to protect their privacy.

It is worth noting that as a PhD student researcher, I was not working in a study abroad office or professionally affiliated with any of the hosts who participated in my study at the time it was conducted. This is a departure from the norm since much of the study abroad literature is often authored by faculty who write about their own programs or ones run by the institution in which they are employed (e.g., see articles published in the latest volume of *Frontiers*: Namaste & Namaste, 2024; Nowak et al., 2024; Robinson & Ame, 2024; Vermeulen et al., 2024). I was at first concerned that this lack of familiarity may have caused research participants to feel uneasy opening about some of their more negative hosting experiences. But, on the contrary, my sense was that because I was familiar enough with the field of study abroad but also not connected in any way to the students, faculty, or institutions that local hosts reflected upon as part of our interview, they were much more open than they might have been had I been performing a program assessment exercise on behalf of their employer.

4. Findings

4.1. The Precarity of Employment

A primary factor that seems to push local faculty to teach American students in a study abroad setting in Florence, is how difficult it is to obtain a professorship at an Italian university. Alberta, an Italian faculty member with a PhD in English Literature from a British university who has been teaching American students for more than a decade, has never worked for an Italian university. She explained that obtaining a job at an Italian university is extremely competitive, and that it is "very much tied in with politics and favors" and that without someone "protecting you and pushing you in a way" it can feel impossible to navigate. She explained that, in her view, it is "not an open process" and while many jobs are posted publicly, you end up finding out later that there was an internal candidate or nepotism at play in the final hire.

Another professor, Rosanna, who taught Art History for many years at an independent school for visiting students in Florence, recounted her own perspective on navigating the Italian professorial system:

> The difference is that in Italy to teach you need to be older, and have much more education. It's not so much about the quality of your teaching or if a person is more professional. It's sort of old fashioned. It's still kind of a socialist country. You take this kind of exam and once you go to the exam and you go inside the ranks, once it's your turn, you could be sent to Sicily if there is a position available. If you refuse, you lose it. Then you start again.

She expressed frustration with this system which, in her view, forced many PhDs out of cities that they wanted to live in to be close to family and friends in order to pursue an academic life. She explained that even for those who are part of this system and take professorships in places where they may not actually want to live, they often arrive at their destination and find that pay is low and until they rise through the ranks, the working conditions for a junior faculty member are not very good. This sense of injustice carried over into Rosanna's explanation of how she sees corruption impact academic productivity in the Italian system differently than in the United States. She explained it in this way:

> I prefer [work] in the U.S. then to remain part of the corrupted Italian state. I do prefer the dynamics of your country because even if there is corruption in every country, [in the U.S.] if your brain works they always find a way to give you a chance. Eventually they will abuse you but they give you a chance, first. Here, no. You remain out of many dynamics, you

> risk dying, to be put in a corner. They say you must not work so much or else the others don't seem good enough. Some of the best brains of the work are impeded to work, this is the Italian dynamics and I hate it. To see a good brain put to sleep, to me, is one of the worst shames you can do to a human being more than violence.

Rosanna further explained this dynamic in which there is a lot of sensitivity in the academy to junior faculty outshining others - that there is a real emphasis on waiting your turn. While others, like Leta, a professor in her mid-50s, shared comparative experiences of having taught first at an Italian university and then making the switch to teaching full-time for a study abroad program in Florence. Leta recounted how she was able to land a position at an Italian university but soon thereafter had a child who was born with a health condition and needed extra care. She had some flexibility in her work but was only being paid 22 euros per hour, which was not enough to sustain herself and her child in the city where she was teaching. This, combined with her English language fluency, led her to apply to teach as part of a study abroad program, where she had been teaching, on and off, for more than a decade.

The narrative of Italian nationals who left Italy and obtained a PhD abroad, and then returned to their country with knowledge of the challenges associated with getting or keeping a job at an Italian university, was a common one. However, the experience of being an international student, combined with English-language fluency and a terminal degree makes them very attractive candidates for teaching jobs within the study abroad context. Alberta expressed that:

> Many of them have the same background as me, they've been abroad, they did their PhD abroad, they worked abroad, when they came back knowing the situation of Italian universities they wanted to use their PhD with the advantage that they could speak English. That's the best place for people like me and many of my colleagues that have an English-speaking background and research and PhD background. That would probably be the main reason. They're going to be frustrated with the level and the lack of respect sometimes but generally I think they enjoy the opportunity to be able to do their job even though it's not what they would've wanted to do.

While local faculty who teach in the study abroad context felt good about putting their English language skills to use, and being able to teach students - they echoed Alberta's sentiment that they were not teaching at the level that they hoped, and that there were often many "other duties as assigned" when teaching

in a study abroad setting that wouldn't be the case in a "typical" faculty job. Many faculty in a study abroad context in Florence do not conduct research; if they do, it is on their own time - and not funded as part of their faculty appointment. Further, many of my study participants expressed frustration with the lack of job security. While several of them have taught for the same constellation of study abroad programs for many years, they often have to take on teaching four, five, or sometimes six courses in a semester in order to make a living wage. This is why Rosanna says: "try to find a place that pays you in America to work in Italy. That would be the ideal solution."

4.2. Classroom Challenges

Having considered the pathways that bring local faculty to the work of teaching U.S. students in a study abroad context in the first place, this next theme explores some of the challenges that they face in the classroom itself. The first of which is not unfamiliar to those of us who teach in classrooms on U.S. campuses - inappropriate use of technology. Several local faculty members lamented the presence of cell phones in their classrooms and the use of laptops for online shopping or social media scrolling instead of notetaking. Their sense is that students are used to blending into large lectures halls at their home university, but study abroad courses tend to be smaller, and in a group of 15 students, and as local faculty member, Ada, explained, "everything that you do can be seen and it is disruptive for the professor and for the other students". She and others articulated seeing this behavior as a sign of disrespect both for the instructor and for other students.

Another major challenge that faculty expressed as being disruptive of their teaching is extreme absences. Ada, explained her sense of this problem being founded in a misconception of what coursework will be like as a study abroad student in Italy:

> I mean, the thing is that, generally speaking, the students think they come here and the courses will be easier, they won't have to put as much effort into them, then they actually realize it's a real course and they have to work and show up.

Many local study abroad administrators shared that even with strict attendance policies, students are often skipping classes to travel. Some providers have tried to address this by only offering courses Monday through Thursday, or in one case, Tuesday through Thursday, but still students are traveling and missing

coursework, which faculty have to catch up on or provide alternative ways to engage the material.

Deeper than issues related to cell phone usage and attendance, are faculty's sense of students' preparation for academic work in a new cultural setting. Longtime faculty member at a U.S. university center in Florence, Marco, put it this way:

> My impression of American students overall, is that they're less prepared. Mainly about basic things that for us are maybe more solid, like history and geography. But at the same time they're able to resolve problems much more efficiently. They're educated to resolve things for the process. Whereas Italians are more about knowing. Italians in school, they study a lot but they are not asked their opinion too much. What I see with American students, and maybe sometimes only some of them,…when they are given a task to do something new, they progress much quicker. They're able to criticize what they're doing and evaluate their work. At the same time, I see that…for us in Italy, we go to school where you have to know some things and if you don't know them it's a problem.

Marco shared an example that he uses in his World History classes each semester in which he asks students to put major civilizations - that existed thousands of years apart - in chronological order. Semester after semester he reports that the U.S. students he teaches are unable to order the civilizations correctly, and so he finds himself having to review material that he would expect university students to know. He attributes this to a sort of ethnocentrism in the U.S. education system, whereby students are not told that they really need to know about those that came before them, because their education is about problem solving, efficiency, and critique.

He juxtaposed this U.S. student's lack of preparation to that of incoming Chinese students who he claimed, "you can clearly see, have a different type of preparation." He noted that the Chinese students he has taught know quite a bit about Italian history, such that he is able to teach them similarly to how he might teach Italian students at a similar level. However, Marco commented that just because American students do not have this historical and cultural preparation does not mean that they are not able to "do something really great and beautiful." He appreciates the U.S. system for what he perceives to be the "flexibility to be open to individual capabilities."

4.3. Bending to the U.S. Educational System

Marco reported the ways in which both his curriculum and pedagogy is catered to U.S. students based on his assessment of their preparation for a certain type of learning. In the same spirit, this section details the ways in which local faculty reported bending to the U.S. education system while living and working in Italy. The following hypothetical was shared with me by Livio, a study abroad administrator and faculty member at a U.S. university center in Florence. In it, he articulates his expectation that the Italian faculty that he hires adjust to U.S. student pedagogical expectations and why he sees this as the right thing to do. He said:

> Imagine yourself as a future candidate for a position and you're Italian, 100%. You grew up here, you grew up used to a system which is the one that I'll describe very briefly. If you want to work for me or any of the other 44 universities that we have in Florence you have to adjust to that system. An average American student on study abroad is already exposed to culture shock, which is really, really, really, strong, so imagine if you had to expose that kid to another completely different teaching methodology. It would be impossible to cope with that. So, we try to, all the faculty that I hire, all the people I've been working with, know they have to adjust to an extent. You cannot become American 100% because you keep something that is yours. For example, being more open. Speaking about your life, giving examples related to your personal life, is something they usually don't do in the US. You use yourself, use your life. It's interesting because in many cases you can compare your perspective to theirs. You're here as a guest, a cultural guest but *I'm here as a guest in your system*.

This line of thinking enables lots of different kinds of bending to the perceived expectations, abilities, and comfortability of U.S. students in the Italian study abroad classroom. Several local faculty members noted that students have expectations for support that may be aligned with what they receive at U.S. colleges and universities but are not typical in Italian higher education settings. However, some see this as justified because, as Alberta put it, "they expect a lot, because they pay a lot." She explained that she thinks that the high cost of participation in study abroad programs, and indeed U.S. higher education changes the dynamic from one where a student must perform well to have *the privilege of attending university*, to one where the university must perform well to have the privilege of *that student* and the tuition dollars that

they bring. Alberta also surfaced her sense that this entitlement is exacerbated by study abroad programs systematically removing barriers to academic success. An example that she provided was about textbooks. She said: "students aren't asked to do anything, not even get their own books in the library. We scan them and give it to them so that they don't have to look it up". To this point, she thinks that the "excellent Italian students" are "double prepared" because they have to navigate a highly structured academic system designed to weed out underperformers. Whereas, she suggests "the excellent American students are good, fantastic, extraordinary, but spoiled."

In the U.S. context, student support services are an integral part of university-life. But many local professors lamented how this level of support was neither part of their own, domestic, Italian university experience nor their study abroad experience. One faculty member, Concetta, who teaches cultural studies for a U.S. university study abroad center, detailed her own study abroad experience in this way:

> When I studied abroad with the ERASMUS program, I went to a German university. I had to learn German and take exams in German. I didn't have a student advisor or event coordinator for me. If I had a problem, I had to solve it by myself. So, it's very different how we perceive studying abroad from Europe, the difference between Europe and the United States. Our universities cannot afford to do that. They're not private so our state cannot pay for other branches of our universities abroad. It's very, very different. There's a difference in the system.

The ERASMUS model was ubiquitous in local faculty's conception of what "European style" study abroad is - and Concetta notes, in order for her to study at a German university she had to be proficient in German. But many of the local faculty with whom I spoke, discussed the deprioritization of Italian language as part of study abroad in Italy over the past 20 years, and how they see that as bending to the U.S. system. One faculty member explained how they think this is connected to the deprioritization of language learning at U.S. universities more broadly as they have heard from colleagues in the U.S. that many universities' modern language departments are being retrenched. Others understood the lack of engagement with Italian language learning as an example of their local study abroad institutions bending both to the U.S. system as well as to market pressures. As students' motivation to learn Italian has decreased so has their interest in study abroad programs that require it, and there is a line of thinking that in order to increase enrollments programs must be flexible on requiring Italian language study.

Another way that local faculty bend to the U.S. system is through their instructional and assessment methods. Local faculty spoke to me about their own training, and their own pedagogical experiences as students within the higher education system in Italy, as well as in other countries where some of them were ERASMUS exchange students. They explained that the Italian pedagogical tradition is typically more lecture oriented, but that U.S. students often do not respond well to that method of instruction. Further, Concetta told me about how she assigns quite a few essays, and that:

> They [students] come to me sometimes saying oh I haven't written an essay in ages. I don't know how to write an essay. There are some cultural approaches to teaching and learning that they find different when they come here. Professors sometimes struggle with that.

She went on to explain that often students in her Cultural Studies courses are not studying Social Science, and instead are taking her course to satisfy a distribution requirement while abroad. And so, in her view, not only are many students not familiar with the teaching methods or assessment, but the content is brand new to them too. Very few courses in a study abroad context have prerequisites because students are often coming from lots of different home institutions and so this can limit the depth with which a local faculty member can engage their material, which has caused frustration for some.

While bending to the U.S. system caused frustration and even resentment for some, others reported being inspired and motivated by the challenge of having to bend to the U.S. system. Carmella, a local faculty member with decades of experience teaching U.S. students in Florence said that she loved teaching students from outside of Italy. She explained how working with non-Italian students sharpens her teaching and makes her think about different ways to communicate:

> Teaching to people from other countries, it's an opportunity to open my mind and try to understand their problems or their way to understand or not understand things I say. It's very important for me that it's a benefit to have them come into my culture and I can't do that with the Italian students.

Likewise, Marco expressed his appreciation for the U.S. system of education and shared his view that in some ways, the U.S. system is stronger than the Italian model, and so he does not mind bending to it. He expressed how at first, he was resistant to the type of "spoon-feeding" that was expected of him as a local

faculty member teaching U.S. students in the study abroad context. He explained that in contrast, in the Italian higher education system, “because it is free we’re always looking to cut down. If there are 100 students in a class, by the end we want 10”. This competition can be motivating for some but demoralizing for others. He now sees that in the U.S. system, which takes a more compassionate approach, everyone is “growing step-by-step” and that no one is left behind. In the Italian system, he shared, there is an assumption that if you did not make it to the top of the class, that you “don’t want it enough or aren’t good enough” which he acknowledges is not always the case.

5. Discussion

The precarity of employment, challenges in the classroom, and bending to the U.S. educational system all contribute to the experience of local faculty who teach U.S. students in the study abroad context in Florence. In Italy, the pathway to a professorship - or otherwise permanent teaching job - at a local university is highly complex and political. This is a strong push factor for local PhDs to pursue teaching for study abroad programs. However, the precarity of cobbling together one-off teaching gigs semester-to-semester can be a very stressful way to earn a living. And though some faculty are employed full time by the university or provider that runs the study abroad program in which they work, many are not. While complete student turnover term-by-term and uncertain enrollments likely make permanent appointments a challenge, these market driven considerations cause many local faculty to enter the classroom already feeling as if they have run a race.

Once they arrive in the classroom, they experience challenges related to cell phone usage and absences - as well as with preparation. While faculty noted the many brilliant, well-prepared students they have had over the years, their sense is that U.S. students’ preparation at their home university, but especially in the K-12 context, is very different than in Italy. They perceive a difference between the Italian expectation of memorization, particularly of historical dates and events, and the U.S. focus on problem solving. Further, as mentioned in the Methods section, the data for this study was collected pre-pandemic and so, many of these challenges have likely been exacerbated by the loss of time in student’s U.S. K-12 classrooms. While many teachers across global contexts are dealing with the impact of COVID-19 on their classrooms and are altering their teaching methods to help reach diverse learners - what is special about the on-site study abroad context is that in addition to these pandemic related

challenges, there are differences in academic cultures that exist between students and professors that complicate the academic exchange.

What may be more surprising than the differences themselves is the extent to which faculty feel that they need to bend to the academic culture of the visiting students. Certainly, this is not a feeling shared by U.S. faculty teaching visiting international students in U.S. classrooms. If the goal of study abroad is immersion in another culture, having Italian faculty teach as if they are "guests in the U.S. academic system" stymies that immersion process. And, even if immersion is *not* a stated goal of a particular program, presumably instilling a sense of cultural humility in U.S. students is - and why would the cultural humility that we want students to exhibit in their host community *outside* the classroom not extend *inside* the classroom?

Interestingly, some faculty were frustrated by this need to bend and felt resentful of administrative decisions made within their organizations that they see as primarily serving market-based imperatives. While others, or in some instances those same faculty, also appreciate the culture shock that students experience living in Italy and think that asking U.S. students to learn within the Italian system would be "too much for them to handle." And so, they are acknowledging a cultural mismatch (Stephens et al., 2012) between themselves and their students, and are altering their methods for the benefit of student learning - thereby being culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2017). This illustrates a desire amongst faculty to keep students in the Learning Zone but given their own experiences within the Italian system, there is some disagreement on what can, or should, push students from the Learning Zone into the Panic Zone.

Many local faculty think of the U.S. system as less rigorous and of the visiting students they teach as ill-prepared for postsecondary academic work. Many local faculty further think that sending institutions should do more to either vet students for academic readiness or prepare them more effectively for their studies abroad. However, they acknowledge that this is unlikely given the market forces driving many academic decisions in the study abroad context. Faculty members observe that with the elimination of required Italian language courses at many study abroad centers in Florence, it is not only they who are adapting to the U.S. system. Often, their administration is also accommodating the preferences of U.S. student consumers.

6. Implications

The on-site study abroad classroom is a place in which program administrators and faculty have a great deal of autonomy to shape the student experience. However, this autonomy is limited when there is an expectation, or an instinct, to cater to U.S. students by bending to the U.S. academic system. While the intention of not overwhelming students with a different academic culture while they are grappling with culture shock outside the classroom is well intentioned, transformative learning theory would suggest that in order for students to experience transformative learning, they need to be facing with "disorienting dilemmas" to push them from the Comfort Zone into the Learning Zone. Some might argue that they are experiencing these dilemmas outside of the classroom and that very well may be. However, if transformative learning is *only* or *primarily* taking place outside of the classroom, what is the value of studying abroad as opposed to backpacking through Europe independently? And while the benefits of community engaged learning are many, the in-classroom experience abroad could serve a discursive purpose of breaking down ethnocentric notions of the superiority of the U.S. academy. Students should see local host faculty as the scholars that they are, which would be further enabled by local faculty having more autonomy as it relates to their teaching and assessment style.

In a time where tourists, and by extension visiting U.S. students, are highly catered to and in which students have come to expect that catering (Datskovska, 2023) study abroad faculty could be playing an equalizing force by asking students to bend to even *some* local instructional methods. Where authenticity is lost in the fury of global economic exchange, the classroom could be a democratizing space in which local customs and perspectives, that are hushed by the power of the U.S. dollar and those who wield it, are brought (back) to the fore.

While this study was limited to a small group of local faculty in Florence, Italy, the trends seen across national contexts in the Robinson, Doughty, et al.'s (2025) study of resident directors in Europe would suggest that the themes that emerged from local faculty in Florence may also be present across study abroad contexts in Europe. The design of U.S. colleges and universities and study abroad providers operating study abroad centers in major European cities, whereby local faculty are hired to teach visiting U.S. students is somewhat consistent, would also suggest the possibility of similarities across contexts.

7. Policy Recommendations

Highlighting challenges experienced by local faculty in study abroad contexts in Florence is a first step toward improving their working conditions and striking a balance between student and sending institutional desires and local faculty's professional needs. Below, I am humbly proposing three key policy recommendations for us to consider as a field as we work toward building international programs that center on mutuality and equity in global learning.

First, involve local faculty in program evaluation. At present, much of the academic literature on study abroad programs remains focused on student learning. And while student learning is central to what colleges and universities should be interested in, there is often a conflation in the study abroad context between student *satisfaction* and student *learning*. In order to drive student *learning* while also attending to the promotion of equity and inclusion in global teaching and learning much more research and evaluation is needed to understand the on-site study abroad ecosystem more fully. Central to this ecosystem are local faculty and staff, who are currently under-researched as a key stakeholder group in study abroad programs. Further, local faculty and staff can and should be involved in the design, implementation, and analysis of program evaluations in order to leverage their expertise, on-site experience, and perspectives as those who produce the global classroom.

Second, support local faculty's professional and academic network development. To this end, universities and provider organizations should strive to position local faculty – both rhetorically and pragmatically, as the experts and academics that they are. Local faculty are often hired as part-time, contingent contract workers with minimal benefits despite the centrality of their labor to the study abroad enterprise. We should strive to implement financial staffing models that would allow local faculty to occupy more secure and long-term contracts. They should have access to the same instructional support as their U.S. campus-based counterparts, and ideally would have at least courtesy appointments in a relevant academic department. Being able to access funds for professional development, or pathways for collaboration with academics at the institutions which are sending the students whom they are teaching may help broaden networks for local faculty so that they begin to feel less like they are "guests" in the U.S. education system and more like equal partners in a joint effort to educate global citizens. Europe-based study abroad associations, like Association of American Colleges and Universities in Italy

(ACCUPI) could be helpful in advocating for this support from their member institutions.

Third, create pathways for instruction alongside local students. Because most study abroad centers host primarily, or exclusively, visiting students there are often few opportunities for U.S. students to be in classroom settings with local students. Because so few U.S. students speak Italian well enough to take advantage of the opportunity that some centers provide for them to enroll in local university courses, the engagement that U.S. students have with local students is often outside the classroom. Perhaps if local faculty had the opportunity to teach to combined groups of local and U.S. students, through partnerships with local faculty who are teaching at Italian universities, local faculty would feel less like guests in the U.S. system and visiting students would have a more authentic, Italian, academic experience in which *they* need to bend to local academic cultures.

To conclude, local faculty are an often-overlooked stakeholder in center-based study abroad programs, who deserve more attention – both in study abroad research as well as in policy development and program implementation. Our goal should not only be to provide international education experiences for our students, but to do so in a way that models the principles of equity and inclusion that our programs espouse. Attention to these principles can not only apply to increasing access to study abroad for diverse U.S. students - but it must also extend to all those involved in the on-site study abroad ecosystem, or else we risk perpetuating the very systems of global inequality that international education should disrupt.

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