

Book Review

Kenneth Wagner and Tony Magistrale's *Writing Across Culture: An Introduction to Study Abroad and the Writing Process*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995. 154 pp.

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A S A Q U I C K tour of college and university homepages on the World Wide Web will show, opportunities for off-campus study are prominent features in self-profiles by institutions of higher education throughout the world. As many U.S. undergraduates continue to put study abroad near the top of their educational priorities and as study abroad programs proliferate and prosper, there can be no doubt that students are crossing oceans and national borders with vigor. And so it should be.

Still, study abroad remains controversial on many U.S. campuses, as degree credits earned in other countries are evaluated on home campuses, and tuition dollars targeted for home campuses are sent to programs and institutions hosting U.S. Students abroad. In educational policy, the "value" of study abroad-in both credits and dollars-often eclipses other questions of value, such as the opportunity for global awareness and the firsthand knowledge of cultural specificity that are the incalculable benefits of study in a foreign setting.

While experiential learning is tough to measure, difficult to evaluate for academic credit, and a challenge for programs to facilitate, it is central to many students' goals for study abroad. In recent years, cultural learning and diversity training have become more prominent in on-campus education as higher education institutions strive to meet the needs of a more heterogeneous clientele. For students considering study abroad, cultural learning has also come to mean more than just an opportunity for adventure. Most students considering study abroad know that cultural learning will give them valuable life skills. Many students consider knowledge of another culture and language an added credential in the highly competitive professional job market they face on graduation. But understanding life in another culture requires more than the desire, plus a semester freed up from other academic agenda.

Students need guidance and systematic strategies to make their months abroad culturally and personally transformative.

In their slim volume *Writing Across Culture*, Ken Wagner and Tony Magistrale suggest writing as a tool to make cultural learning a more conscious, tangible, and productive dimension of study abroad. They advocate that students keep an "analytical notebook" throughout their stay in the host country. Through regular entries submitted to a program director or teacher for feedback, students keep a candid, self-conscious record of events and situations they have observed, how they feel about them, and, most important, how they explain them given their current knowledge of their new cultural setting. By writing about the day-to-day events that so often seem awkward to newcomers, students can deepen their understanding of the underlying cultural system that gives sense to those events. And by charting the early days of culture shock, the mishaps of language learning, and the growing mastery of day-to-day routines, students will construct a record of the cross-cultural experience more authentic than photographs, postcards, or letters home, because the notebook will reveal through personal anecdotes the process of coming to terms with the host culture.

While the advice to students to keep a journal of their travels is not new, Wagner and Magistrale take this advice a big step forward to offer writing strategies that will enable students to go beyond cursory observations to deeper insights. Wagner and Magistrale look closely at the potential for understanding inherent in different modes of writing. Britton's categories of writing modes by function and audience further their aim. As they adopt Britton's writing categories, they also critique secondary school education in the United States, which, in their view, fails to encourage students to try out a diversity of styles in presenting their ideas.

"Transactional writing" common to term papers, memos, proposals, and reports is the writing style most cultivated in educational settings. It strives for analysis and explication through dispassionate observation, but the impersonal, detached stance of transactional writing can hamper students from tapping into their own internal resources and feeling states. "Expressive writing, the writing of self-discovery, tends to be informal and digressive in style and is discouraged in the writing students do for assessment purposes in

school." Poetic writing," the writing found in fiction, drama, and poetry, can be unconventional because it is imaginative. It finds a place in U.S. school settings in English classes but is not encouraged in other academic disciplines.

Wagner and Magistrate invite students to combine transactional and expressive writing in an "analytical writing" style for their notebooks. The power of this style lies in the combination of the 1-centered" personal voice with the observational and interpretive orientation of transactional prose. Students can begin with impressions---reactions to readings and lectures; observations and feelings about holidays, food, the weather; and even anger, frustration, or disillusionment with their experiences. Then they go on to explain why they had the experience, reaction, feeling, or opinion. By taking stock of their own responses, students can bring clashes of values into focus and begin to put personal experiences into a larger social and theoretical context.

Wagner and Magistrate's vision of what cultural learning through analytical writing can be for students is ambitious, for they attribute to study abroad the potential for political awakening. They envision a process of personal growth that can help students shake off their late twentieth century cynicism and embrace the possibility that individuals can make a difference in the larger world. Analytical writing involves cognitive processes more rigorous than are common in conversation. In their view, through writing we push past the limits of our current understanding to grasp new insights, transcend the discomforts of cultural learning and culture shock, and escape the defeatism of a worldview in which individuals are seen as powerless to effect positive change. They draw a parallel between understanding new cultural settings and developing new insights in science and art by offering students exemplary journals, those kept by Dostoyevsky, Darwin, Rutherford, and Leonardo as they pushed beyond the limits of their own thinking to forge new, creative breakthroughs in their fields.

The volume is aimed simultaneously at students, study abroad program directors, and orientation leaders. One chapter presents a sample analytical notebook, including teacher comments. Another provides advice to students on how to conduct research developed from their own interests, how to find and assess data, and how to draft and

revise a research paper. The close attention to writing modes and the discussion of cultural adjustment make this book ideal for use during students' first weeks in the host country, when they are first faced with the new and unexpected. But it also lends itself to use in predeparture orientation or courses intended as preparation for study abroad. Most important, it demonstrates the pedagogical potential of experiential learning in study abroad and advocates that cultural learning be a systematic focus of study abroad programs.