

## **One Classroom, Three Weeks, Four Continents... Live! John Lipinski, Indiana University of Pennsylvania**

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### **Abstract**

*This article outlines using modern telecommunications technology to create a virtual study abroad experience without leaving the classroom. Videoconferencing, smart phones, and connectivity programs like Skype make it possible for students to connect live, real time to almost any corner of the world with an internet connection. Faculty can leverage relationships around the world or reach out to interested parties to design a world class experience. During March of 2016 my class was able to virtually travel to four continents in three weeks.*

**Key Words:** Cultural Awareness, Study Abroad, Virtual Education, Teleconference

### **Introduction**

One can hardly miss all the posters touting study abroad programs when walking down almost any university corridor. They display photos of scenic beaches, historic ruins, and gothic cathedrals and promise the educational experience of a life time. They post slogans like “Experience the world”, “Discover an adventure”, and “Adventures are the best way to learn”. Do the trips deliver the unparalleled academic experience that they promise? The academic literature certainly supports them. Universities promote and encourage these programs in an effort to graduate students who are intellectually competent (Twombly et. Al., 2012). Research has demonstrated that the study abroad experience enhances students’ abilities regarding the understanding and management of complexity (Burn et. Al. 1990; Ctiron 1996) and it enhances students’ understanding of diversity, critical thinking, and ethical conduct (Mckeown, 2009). With such lofty ideals one can see the study abroad experience as a critical component to any university degree. However, given all the promotion that these programs receive on campus, do they deliver the promised impact?

Unfortunately, even with all the hype, student indulging in a study abroad experience are a relative rarity. Over 90% of US universities offer study abroad programs (Hoffa & DePaul 2010). In the 2010-2011 school year, only 270,604 or 1% of the 20 million US students enrolled in higher education programs participated in a study abroad experience according to a report published by the Institute of International Education in partnership with the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (Institute of International Education, 2011). Cost is often the deterrent. Nearly 75% of students cite cost as the primary reason for not taking advantage of such programs (Fischer, 2013). Having been a part of such an experience, which I found to be the most valuable and transformative part of my undergraduate education, after becoming a professor it was often the number one piece of advice that I gave to my students. “Leave the country for a semester.” “Go someplace where the main language is not English.” “Experience a different culture.” The advice was given to and still is often received with great enthusiasm by my students, but there is almost no follow through. Much like the Fischer study, when asking students why they do not take advantage of the opportunity, the commonly cited reason is cost. Initially I thought that the biggest service that I could give to my students was to uncover scholarship opportunities to cover the expense. Unfortunately, my findings were limited and often only covered a small portion of the experience. There had to be another way to make a strategic decision (Potter et. al 2010).

During a trip to Santa Maria University in Chile to deliver a guest lecture, I had dinner with a classmate from my PhD program and we conversed on what an amazing experience it is for students to spend time studying abroad and how we both had challenges getting our students to participate in the available programs. That evening we hit on the idea of Virtual Study Abroad (Lipinski 2014).

We would use modern telecommunications to give our students a taste of the study abroad experience. The next week when I returned to the US, we did the most rudimentary experiment. Each using a web cam and Skype, we connected our classes for a virtual meeting and each did half of the lecture. The concept was well received by the students. No doubt the novelty brought excitement to the classroom. However, using \$50 web cams and Skype was a poor solution for two large lecture halls.

We began to explore better solutions and I found that my campus had portable teleconference equipment that could be placed in the classroom. The technology allows one to set up a professional teleconference using the internet, so unlike teleconference calls of old which incurred long distance telephone fees, the calls were now free. Unfortunately my colleague did not have equivalent equipment. To make it work, he applied for a grant to purchase the equipment and much to our delight the grant was made. We made the decision that we were going to work together to develop a fully integrated class where we would use the teleconference equipment to do a full semester together.

I faced another challenge with my colleague in Chile. His equipment was not in place for the start of the fall semester. He would be ready to go in the spring semester, but unfortunately our academic calendars would not line up. Chile goes on their summer break right after Christmas in January and February. We would miss almost half the semester if we tried to work together. Clearly I would need a partner in the Northern Hemisphere if I wanted to attempt my experiment in the Spring semester. Who to work with? I sent a blind email to the Dean of the University of Pecs' business school, the university where I did my study abroad experience twenty years earlier. Intrigued, he forwarded my email to one of his professors. After two short discussions on the goals of the experiment and a test to make sure that our teleconference equipment was compatible, we agreed to link our classes and let our students know that they were about to embark on a virtual study abroad!

We both agreed that standard classroom lectures would be of limited value. Our goals were 1) To promote classroom discussion between the students 2) Establish out of class assignments that would require Hungarian and American students to work together virtually on their own time and 3) to include guest speakers from the community who would bring the US and Hungarian business cultures to life. The first class was a smashing success. Students from each program had ahead of time prepared short video tours of their cities. After some minor prodding from the faculty, the students began asking one-another questions about their culture, their university experience, their hopes beyond graduation, and even questions about their preconceptions of the other. The most memorable exchange was when a US student talked about how she worked 20 hours per week as a full time student and how challenging it was to balance both. She then asked the Hungarian students how many of them work part time jobs. Not a hand went up. She commented "Must be nice." The Hungarian professor then chuckled and stated "Perhaps we should rephrase the question to how many Hungarian students would like to work part time?" At that, most of the Hungarian hands went up. The rest of that first class was a discussion on youth unemployment in Hungary and how retail and restaurant jobs, staples among US college students are seen as full time careers in Hungary. No owner would want to try and balance a full time college student's schedule knowing that the student would likely leave after graduation when there was no shortage of young people who would view such a position as a lifetime career. Part time jobs for college students were almost nonexistent.

Throughout that semester, both my colleague and I largely utilized the flipped classroom where students learned the core material on their own. Our classes met together on Tuesdays and the primary purpose of our get together was to bring in guest speakers to highlight the concepts being covered in the class. The guests were intrigued with the possibility of delivering a transcontinental lecture. That first semester on the US side I recruited executives from Firestone, LP Products, UPS and Suntrust Bank along with a patent lawyer to discuss intellectual property law and a partner from Price Waterhouse Coopers to discuss international tax law. My Hungarian counterpart countered with executives from Lafarge, Procter & Gamble, Zsolnay, and the Foreign Trade Representative from Hungary to Japan. No doubt the students were exposed to a number of viewpoints on how global businesses operate. However, the true multicultural experience came from the group projects that students had to complete. On their own time, groups of 5-6 students completed a research project which required them to meet on their own time. Skype and Facetime were common tools. With smart phones, meetings were held all over town. Early in the semester I made the point that the one thing that will be missing from our virtual study abroad experiment will be the "café experience" but wouldn't you know it, many students took advantage of the meetings to catch glimpses of life in both countries cafeterias, sidewalk cafés, Starbucks, and one team did their project on shopping malls which included virtual visits for both teams.

Many students even struck up pen pal type relationships and did virtual house tours, met family members, and one student (2 years later) actually went to meet with his team mates in person. Without a single passport, airplane ticket, or hotel room, students were able to gain a deep understanding of another culture. At the end of the semester we surveyed our students and found the experience to be very positive and the students agreed that they learned a lot from their international colleagues. The practice of doing an assignment across cultures opened their eyes on the thoughts and values of their counterparts and, to a degree, exposed them to different values and work habits.

The experience was nowhere near universally praised as free rider problems crept into many projects and students with limited motivation did not make the required effort to fully engage with their counterparts, but in the end 80% of the combined classes indicated that they would do the course again. Armed with this positive experience, my Hungarian colleague and I decided to repeat the experience the next spring. That summer I presented on the experience in London at the International Management Research Academy conference and the concept was well received. Colleagues from around the world wanted to try the concept out with me; however, I was committed to working with my Chilean colleague in the fall and my Hungarian colleague in the spring. I did walk away with two important contacts, a professor from the University of Zimbabwe and a colleague from Beijing Normal University. While I never developed a full-blown course with either, both have provided interesting one off presentations for my students and helped to inspire an interesting research project.

That fall I was supposed to initiate the program with my colleague in Chile. Instead my students got a lesson in international turmoil. The Chilean students went on strike demanding education reforms and increases in government funding. We were able to do one class from my colleague discussing the situation, but the Chilean exposure was largely limited to stories about student protests, including the death of two Santa Maria students. We did do one session with my colleague from Beijing Normal University, but the 12-hour time difference was a considerable challenge. Our early morning 9AM class was 9PM their time. We shared a guest speaker but it was nowhere near the experience of the full dedicated full semester experience. The next semester I repeated the experience with my Hungarian colleague with similar success. I mixed in one class with the University of Zimbabwe when the Hungarians were on spring break. Sub Saharan Africa offered quite a contrast for my students. Runaway inflation had a huge impact. The class had two guests, one, a US based bank economist from PNC Bank and the other, a senior official from the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe. While the discussion got a little technical, students on both sides got a clear idea on how runaway inflation destroys an economy and how officials from more stable countries react to such an unstable situation.

In future semesters I continued working with the Hungarians every spring, expanding our list of guest speakers and welcoming back old favorites. Many faculty members have dropped in to witness the classes. The Hungarians are part of the ERASMUS program which hosts international students from all over Europe, so we have had the class spiced with representatives from all corners of the European Union so students were exposed to opinions from representatives of Germany, Spain, Denmark, Italy and more. The program eventually got started with the Chileans, but it took 3 years to get it off the ground as student strikes delayed the start of the school year two years in a row and my Chilean colleague took a sabbatical in the third year. Thus far the program has worked well with the Chileans, very similar to the program with the Hungarians but with an added benefit. When our students are working on their joint projects, they are only separated by 1 time zone and coordination is much easier. Working with the Chileans it is always interesting to watch how the flipped seasons affect the class discussion. As the US students start the semester in the fall and wrap up as the first snowflakes begin to fall, they interact with colleagues who are experiencing spring and getting ready to take beach vacations as the semester wraps up. Tropical Christmas versus a white Christmas has inspired quite a few interesting conversations. The program with the Hungarians at the University of Pecs has developed deep ties. The program has led to multiple faculty exchanges and 1 week live visits to one another's programs. The students love being surprised when their international counterpart shows up live in the flesh.

### ***Three Weeks, Four Continents***

In March of 2016 my class experienced its most dynamic three-week period. From my classroom, my students got to visit four continents in three weeks. My mentor commented to me that I have created a university level Magic School Bus, joking about the children's show where each week the school bus would fly, swim, dive, or shrink to take the class on magical adventures all over the world. In a sense that is what modern telecommunications equipment allows one to do.

We were having a normal semester with the Hungarians meeting every Tuesday to share a guest speaker. My class also meets on Thursdays without the Hungarians, allowing me to address core material. However, as the class largely follows the flipped classroom model, that time is often devoted to working on projects. As the class has evolved over the years, it has been amazing watching how technology has transformed the experience. Text messaging has exploded. We know that during class US students often text to their Hungarian counterparts.

At the beginning of this three-week period, we were having a technological snafu connecting the teleconference equipment. However, there was no panic. The students were texting one another keeping us apprised of the situation on the other side of the globe, real time. Week one, we had the head of technology transfer from our university, a patent lawyer by training, discussing both the importance of protecting intellectual property and the process by which individuals can license technology to develop new products and businesses based on university based research. That week offered another unique opportunity.

On Thursday my Zimbabwe colleague offered my class to opportunity to join a presentation by an official from the finance ministry on Chinese investment in Zimbabwe. It was an opportunity for my US students to learn about foreign direct investment and how the US is not always the economic center of the universe. (Crothers et. al, 2010)At one point the students enjoyed some good-natured ribbing by the official on how the US is underperforming in Foreign Direct Investment in Africa and it was their job to help make it happen. Week two the Hungarians provided us with a favorite guest, the former Foreign Trade Representative from Hungary to Japan (he is now on the faculty of the university). Students again learned about the relationship of two countries operating without any involvement from the United States and how important it is for countries to have a broad array of trade relationships. On Thursday, my class was transported to Santiago, Chile. My Chilean colleague and I have done projects with a LP Products, a US based company with major operations in Chile. Their Vice President did a joint class talking about the thrills and challenges of being an expatriate employee. Chileans have great respect for “gringo” managers, but it still takes time for a foreign manager to learn the ins and outs of the local culture and the unwritten rules of the local economy. His experience of adjusting to the local environment with his family was a valuable lesson for my students as many will be expected to do an international stint as part of a corporate career.

Week three had a fortuitous alumnus from our university present. When it became widely known that I was conducting a class with the Hungarians, I was introduced to an alumnus who right after graduating in 1991 (the same year that the Soviet Union completely pulled out of Hungary) he and his brother journeyed to Budapest and started the first Western style business Magazine, the Budapest Business Journal which to this day is among the leading business periodicals in the country. Talking with students in both countries about working during the dynamic transition from communism to capitalism, working with Western companies as they entered Eastern Europe, and learning the challenges of launching a business in a country where neither he nor his brother spoke the language always makes for an engaging class. Thursday of that week my colleague at Beijing Normal University offered me the opportunity to join an evening presentation hosted by the student entrepreneurship group that he sponsors (for once the 12 hour time difference worked to our favor!). A leading Chinese real estate developer was presenting and the students got a lesson on how capitalism worked in the modern Chinese economy where the government exerts extremely strong influence over economic activity and has an enormous influence on who is successful in the economy. As week 3 wrapped up, one of my students said to me “Who needs 80 days? We made it around the globe in 3 weeks!”

Visiting Europe, South America, Africa and Asia all from one classroom is an amazing experience as a professor and has received largely positive comments from the students. Occasionally, an accent is too strong to be easily understood. A few guest speakers have assumed that the students possess a more intimate knowledge of their country and I have had to fill in background information after the fact. Technology occasionally fails and it may take longer than expected to connect a class or systems can drop a call and 45 minutes into a session, the class is unexpectedly over. However, even with these challenges, modern teleconference technology makes it possible for unprecedented access. I have done presentations on virtual study abroad and learned from participants that the idea has been use in a number of interesting ways. One colleague, a sociology professor, uses the virtual study abroad technique to connect her class with an Indian reservation where she does research during the summer. Another colleague, an archaeology professor has used the technology to take his class to a dig site in Turkey where his students could learn real time from the team directing the excavation of an ancient Roman forge. Other business colleagues have used the technique to share classes.

The technique is not unique. Distance education has used teleconferencing for decade. The unique twist of virtual study abroad is linking groups of students who would normally only have standard classroom experiences. Developing a curriculum that requires students to interact via small group projects and in class discussions allows for students to have a much deeper cultural experience than they would develop in traditional lecture with the insertion of a few videos. Virtual studies abroad cannot completely mimic the total immersion experience. It is impossible to recreate all the sights and smells or the learning experience of getting lost in the back streets of a foreign city and having to navigate with only rudimentary language skills. However, with only 1% of students being able to take advantage of a traditional full immersion study abroad experience, all students can experience direct contact with another culture and develop a working relationship with students from another country. In a global economy, being able to work remotely with colleagues around the globe has become a necessary skill and is an area where universities have barely scratched the surface.

### ***Tips for Building Your Own Virtual Study Abroad Experience***

The opportunities are all around the university. Did you study with colleagues who took positions at international universities? Do you attend conferences with colleagues from around the globe? Does your school have a strong partnership with a university where you often share exchange students? All offer excellent opportunities to find a colleague interested in building a virtual study abroad course. Universities often have sister schools abroad. This is a chance to develop a working relationship with those partner institutions. Step one is finding an interested counterpart. If all else fails, a “cold call email” may yield surprising results.

Once that colleague has been identified, ensure that your university calendars and time zones align well enough to schedule a course. Many schools’ semesters begin and end weeks apart. This will limit your time for direct contact. Be aware that different countries observe the beginning and end of daylight savings time on different dates which may require an adjustment to the assigned meeting time of the class or a few weeks will be lost until the clocks realign. Also, consider break periods and holidays. If you are conservative by nature, by all means, try experimenting with the technique two or three times during a semester and see how it goes. However, based on experience, developing your syllabus around the experience and giving students regular exposure makes the experience more immersive and leads to committed students developing strong working relationships with their international colleague which leads to a much deeper understanding of the culture.

Choose a course that can be enhanced with involved class discussions and facilitates group projects. A foundational or basic skills class likely would not be a good choice for such a course. Math is math no matter where you go. I also recommend choosing a partner where there are significant differences in opinion. Working with the Hungarians, it has been interesting for my students to work with counterparts who are in a more socialistic society as they get to experience the thoughts and opinions of colleagues who think that Americans are too aggressive and work too hard. My fantasy class has always been to use the technique to connect a US and British History course on the American Revolution, or as the British call it The War of American Independence.

### ***Conclusion***

The Virtual Study Abroad technique allows one to transport their class around to globe. Working closely with international colleagues, one can develop an experience that can give students a taste of a fully immersive experience. Designing a course where students are required to engage in discussions, exposed to experts from each country, and required to work together on small group projects using modern telecommunication technology they will gain a more intimate understanding of a foreign culture than they would via a traditional university lecture course. A strong alignment between the professors and a commitment to requiring students to work collaborative is critical if this technique is to succeed. The course is further enhanced if a faculty exchange can be arranged. There is no doubt that studying abroad is an invaluable experience for university students, but one that only about 1% of the student body engages in during each academic year. Given the financial and logistical challenges, virtual study abroad provides many of the same benefits at no additional cost and can be incorporated into a number of classes across the curriculum.

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