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Introduction to the Special Issue

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Introduction

M. Todd Harper

The idea for this special edition of the *Journal of Global Initiatives* on the impact of new communication technologies and media on education abroad arose not only from my own fourteen years of experience teaching and directing study abroad programs to Greece, Turkey, and Italy; it also stems from my many conversations with other study abroad faculty and professionals. Indeed, study abroad faculty and other international educators around the world have witnessed dramatic changes in the ways that students, faculty, and staff communicate, interact, research assignments, and conceive of multimedia projects during study abroad experiences.

On my first program to Greece in 2005, students were asked to bring writing materials to complete their assignments, and while one or two students might have brought laptops, there was no internet service in either the hotel where they stayed or the classrooms where they learned. If students wanted to contact their parents, they either had to purchase a phone card or go to the local internet café.

When I began directing Kennesaw State University's Summer Program in Italy in 2010, more students were travelling with their laptops, searching out internet "hotspots" throughout the small Tuscan town of Montepulciano, often near cafés and restaurants that offered some wireless service. Although some would email assignments to faculty, who taught in classes without any internet service, most

students still completed their assignments on paper, primarily resorting to their computers to Skype with friends and family back home or to play internet games.

As the Summer Program in Italy grew, Kennesaw State University decided to invest in the renovation of six classrooms in a 12th-century fortress that included fast wireless service that connected to the main campus in Kennesaw, large display monitors where faculty could connect their laptops, and a computer classroom. By 2015, when the renovation was complete, faculty were requiring students to bring laptops or tablets to research and compose written assignments as well as multimedia projects, such as PowerPoint presentations and digital movies. Students who would once Skype parents and friends with their computers were now using relatively inexpensive phone plans on their smartphones, the same phones that they would carry with them to take digital photos and film digital movies, map out their destinations through a GPS system, and connect with their faculty and fellows through programs like GroupMe and WhatsApp.

At the writing of this introduction in 2019, our computer classroom is awaiting the installation of more sophisticated software to be used by our computer science majors and engineers. Similarly, students who once competed with one another for best photo through our Educational Abroad contest—sending printed copies of their photos upon return from the program—now post pictures to the program’s Facebook page and Instagram account in real time. These platforms not only become the site for the photo contest to take place, but they also become a means for advertising the program for next year’s students. Indeed, several faculty have incorporated these and other multimedia platforms into their assignments.

Kennesaw State University's facility in Montepulciano offers state of the art equipment that allows students to research and complete a variety of multimedia assignments, equipment that many other study programs, even those run through our education abroad office, do not necessarily have. However, all of our programs have seen some change in their relation to technology, even if it is limited to faculty and students bringing laptops, tablets, and smartphones. If nothing else, the majority of Kennesaw State University faculty who direct or teach a program in any part of the world (and, we have over 36 homegrown programs that travel to Central and South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe) often assign pre-departure work that can be submitted through the University's courseware package. Likewise, where these same faculty, who might have once requested mainly handwritten assignments at the end of the program, they can now require multimedia assignments be sent electronically any time before, during, and after the study abroad experience.

Of course, this special issue is neither about my experience, nor even really the history of how new communication technologies and media have shaped education abroad within the last fifteen to twenty years. Rather, it examines how faculty teaching abroad as well as the offices that organize and run those programs can better incorporate new communication technologies and media into their programs. Each article examines how an education abroad office, a program, or a teacher adopted some form of new communication technology to enhance their students' understanding and experience of the host culture. A central assumption underlying many of these articles is that new communication technologies and media do more

than enhance or augment existing practices, but that these new technologies, in fact, change the way we think, perceive, and even experience our reality.

Scholars have long theorized the impact of new technologies on literacy and cognition. Eric Havelock (1982), Walter Ong (2013), Greg Ulmer (2004), and Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000) have each argued that changes in new technologies along with their impact on literacy effect the manner in which we think. The advent of writing, for instance, allowed for more sophisticated reasoning since a reader could return to the written text if she were confused or did not understand its meaning the first time. (Of course, multiple oral texts that were often ritualized, such as the Nicene Creed, included complex theological ideas. However, these complex texts needed to be repeated numerous times before their full meaning could be comprehended—hence, their need to be ritualized.)

In regards to new media, Ulmer (2004), Bolter and Grusin (2000) have argued that recent advances in electronic technology have changed the way we experience texts. The electronic text, especially texts with hyperlinks, allows for both linear and non-linear readings. A reader might linearly read from the first to the final word, or she may jump in and out of various hyperlinks to texts that are outside the primary text or places within the primary text. J. David Bolter and Grusin (2000) takes this one step further, arguing that the most recent multimedia texts often incorporate remediated forms of literacy. For example, in order to read a Word document, we must “scroll” down the page, or if we want to pull up a program on our computer, we click an “icon.” Bolter’s reasoning can be applied to the host of video, audio, and photography that we now attach to our multimedia projects.

More than cognition, the rise of new technologies of communication has affected the way that students experience their studies abroad. At the most basic level, these technologies have shrunken the world, providing students with myriad ways to connect with and learn about different peoples, cultures, and countries as well as multiple ways for students to remain connected with family and friends at home on a daily, if not hourly, basis. From some perspectives, this presents a problem. The constant ability to interface with one's own culture through one's own language makes something like cultural and language immersions—hallmarks of a strong foreign language program—difficult. When a student is uncomfortable speaking a foreign language, she may now simply dial home and speak to her parents. When a student is having difficulty finding the correct word or phrase, she now may Google Translate it. This leaves many foreign language faculty feeling as though their students will never be able to move beyond the influence of the home culture. However, such criticism often fails to reflect upon the way that it essentializes cultures, pretending as though culture would remain untouched had these technologies not appeared.

In article one, Annie McNeil Gibson and Emily Capdeville discuss the role that advisors can play in helping students negotiate their intercultural competence and online identities through pre-, during, and post-study abroad. They assert, “Not only must we reimagine the role of advisors as an educational one rather than a logistical one, but we must also reimagine the spaces and ways in which educational advising can take place while also acknowledging the connection between online identities and physical ones.” Later, they observe, “Because intercultural learning and

competency development is inextricably linked to self-awareness and personal identity knowledge (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012), the connection between the ‘real self’ and the online virtual self during study abroad must be valued and explored.” Gibson and Capdeville offer a number of suggestions for advisors to work with students during their pre-, during, and post-study abroad experience. The cyclical experiences of students, for instance, can be used to enhance pre-departure training programs. While students are on their study abroad program, advisors can help guide reflections on the images that they post on platforms such as Instagram or Facebook. Finally, upon return, advisors can encourage students to think about how they have broadened some of their online networks. For Gibson and Capdeville, the ability of the advisor to work with students in an online format and with their online identities can help students develop an awareness and sensitivity to the host culture without falling into the traps of seeing oneself as a savior or Orientalizing the host culture as exotic and other. Todd Lee Goen, Jennifer R. Billinson, and Linda D. Manning outline a variety of reasons and strategies for integrating new technologies into study abroad programming. We live in a digital environment, and the students that we direct and teach on study abroad programs have, for the most part, only known that environment. Faculty must deliberately attune themselves to how students use newer communication technologies. As Goen, Billinson, and Manning observe, “This may seem simple, but requires both exploring students’ lived experiences as well as engaging in meaningful conversations about the ways in which they integrate CT [communications technology] into their lives.” Not only are technologies constantly changing, but the ways in which they are used by

students is changing as well. For example, they note how the current generation of undergraduates no longer use Facebook or Twitter as often as they do Instagram. More importantly, faculty must be willing to integrate newer communication technologies into their assignments and activities on the program. To this end, they review literature on integrating these technologies into a study abroad program and then offer a variety of assignments that they use on their short-term study abroad program to the Hague. These assignments include a framing exercise, wherein students are asked to take photographs and then to reflect upon how they selected, framed, and then took the photograph; a video-clips assignments that asks students to reflect upon their own video clips in the same way that they analyzed movie scenes throughout the semester; and an Instagram assignment that encourages them to upload to a shared Instagram account. In each case, Goen, Billinson, and Manning require students not only to engage within these activities, but to use them as a means to thinking about the relationship of their own experience to these newer technologies. Goen, Billinson, and Manning also examine the variety of ways that a program can use new communication technologies to promote itself to future participants.

In article three, Ann Marie Francis argues that blogs function more than online journals. Their reverse chronology, their capacity to archive material, and, most importantly, their ability to allow reader comments opens up the possibility of interactive exchanges. Speaking on their interactive capacities, Francis notes the dynamism of these exchanges:

The discussions are not limited to the original author and a single reader; instead, readers of the blog may have a conversation between themselves without the original author providing any input other than sharing the original blog post. The comments eventually become an archived part of the blog that allow the original author of the blog and other readers to refer back to. And because the blogs allow for others to comment on them, they encourage authors of blogs to do more than just post new and updated information; rather, blogs are designed for authors and readers to exchange ideas through comments and online discussions, making the blog a live, interactive document that explores opinions, thoughts, and perspectives.

The blog, which creates “a live, interactive document that explores opinions, thoughts, perspectives” becomes especially attractive for teachers and students on a study abroad program who can use them to further the active learning and student engagement that is already present within the study abroad experience. In her own study abroad classes, Francis uses blogs as both a journal for students to record and reflect on their experiences as well as a place to explore and explain the relationship of class concepts to various field trips. In discussing her own experience, she notes her successes, especially in terms of the way that students were able to interact and benefit from one another’s blogs, as well as some of her challenges, most notably poor internet access and a student who struggled because she did not have the correct technology to do the assignments. (The student thought she could use her iPhone as a laptop to upload text and photos to her blog.)

Jessica Stephenson, myself, and Emily Klump provide another take on journaling in article four. With the advent of GPS systems and tracking, they describe their Google Maps project, which was conducted during a Great Books study abroad program to Italy. Stephenson and Harper asked students, including Emily Blount, who reflects on her own project, to pin the various sites that they would visit in Rome, Florence, Orvieto, Siena, and Montepulciano, where the

program was based. For each pin, students uploaded information about the site as well as their photos and textual reflections about visiting the site. Students then used their Google Maps as a heuristic to write a longer, more reflective paper on their journey. In developing the project, Stephenson and Harper, borrowing from Edward Soja's concept of "thirdspace" (1996), hoped that students would come to understand how their own presence at these sites contribute to multiple interpretations of a living space, as well as geometric and attributive space.

In the fifth and final article, Lara Smith-Sitton and Joan McRae argue that study abroad experience listed on a resume has become more important to employers who are increasingly looking for employees that understand and can compete within a global market. However, from the perspective of the student, it is not enough for the student to have an experience, but rather that that student can articulate the significance of that experience in an interview or work setting. Smith-Sitton and McRae provide two assignments that help to make and then articulate connections between their study abroad experience and their future careers. The first assignment is a journaling assignment with a video biography. Students are prompted to record their experiences using a series of interview-style questions as a heuristic. From their journal, they then create a video biography of their experience that can then be added to a LinkedIn account as a resource for future employers. In a second assignment, foreign language students are asked to translate Wikipedia entries from French (in this particular case) to English. The assignment takes the students from producing documents for a classroom setting only to translating needed information on a public platform.

In the end, these five articles merely scratch the surface for what has been done and what can be done using new CT. Much scholarship in this area still remains. In addition to developing new pedagogies, important research needs to be done regarding issues of access. Increasingly, faculty are requiring students to bring laptops and other mobile devices in order to complete assignments, raising questions of whether this is practical or even ethical. (Can a laptop or mobile device be considered a hidden cost, for instance?) Moreover, many programs still face issues with internet access, either because internet service is scarce or because an internet subscription can only be obtained by someone from the host country. Finally, additional work needs to be done on how new media can shape a student's experience and understanding of the host culture. While the five articles in this issue theorize this change as well as provide anecdotal evidence, additional research could help the field begin to measure the effects of new CT on student experience. That said, these five articles offer a meaningful foray into a broader conversation about how study abroad directors and teachers can incorporate and utilize new technologies to theirs and their students' understanding of new and different cultures.

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