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Opening Eyes by Opening Classroom Doors: Multicultural Musings of Study Abroad in Italy

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Opening Eyes by Opening Classroom Doors: Multicultural Musings of Study Abroad in Italy

“The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page.”

~ Saint Augustine ~

Introduction

The experienced traveler welcomes each new trip, perhaps mixed with apprehension while seeking new experiences within one’s comfort zone. Study abroad programs may include a combination of pre-planning, but still the unknown and the unexpected create a unique personalized story. As one travels, the world’s ‘book’ is opened and the traveler is never the same again. This narrative inquiry presents reflections of five university level students, pursuing a degree in early childhood and special education, and their professor and her partner as a result of our four-week study abroad program in Italy. *Valdosta, GA to Valle D’Aosta, Italy* focused on Italian school children and their teachers and an immersion into Italian culture during Maymester, 2015. Our stories illustrate the ever-evolving concept of multiculturalism and how study abroad opportunities contribute to acquiring new perceptions of different cultures through first-hand encounters.

As travelers, we processed interactions in new settings and attempted to scaffold new experiences upon existing ones. We created stories, through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) creating deeper perspectives of another culture, moving beyond previously held generalizations and stereotypes. “Traveling – it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller.” (attributed to Ibn Battatua (1325-1354). I am a storyteller—a university professor—with my own stories to share, examples to give, and lived experiences, which include ten prior trips to Italy. Each trip built on my own Italian heritage, familiar culture, world famous art, music, architecture, inventions, and culinary tastes that reflected home; my shared history. Additional visits brought new understandings of, interactions with, and connections to both ancient and modern culture.

The experiences of these pre-service teachers extended their self-admitted, limited, world-view and perceptions. Ultimately, these experiences challenged these pre-service teachers to open their eyes through participation in a culture other than their own.

Methods

I used narrative inquiry, a qualitative research method of relating lived experiences through stories, to describe and analyze the multicultural experiences of this study abroad program. Connelly and Clandinin posit:

Story...is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience.

Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study (2006, p. 375).

This narrative inquiry is structured from the pre-service teachers' daily journal entries and photographs, formal and informal conversations, and my own observations recorded in a journal. Usher (1997), Josselson (2006), and Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) suggest that structured stories lend meaning and significance to our lives. Clandinin and Huber (2010) state that "researchers attend to the importance of considering the possibility of shifting or changing practice" (p. 7), and Chase (2005) extends that narrative analysis as a form of research reflects personal experiences and inquiry with social and cultural experiences. "Narrative inquiry examines the way a story is told by considering the positioning of the actor/storyteller, the endpoints, the supporting cast, the sequencing and the tension created by the revelation of some events..." (Riley & Hawe, 2005, p. 226). I tracked emerging themes, coding these on a weekly basis to ensure trustworthiness of comments both written and spoken. Participants were consulted prior

to and following the writing of this piece, to assure their experiences and reflections were recounted clearly. Referring to Loh (2013), this study presents verisimilitude and utility, in that “the participants’ particularized meaning-making interpretations...” (p. 9) are presented in a way to the reader that the experiences described throughout are felt. “This quality of verisimilitude is important because it helps others to have a vicarious experience of being in a similar situation and thereby being able to understand the decisions made and the emotions felt by the participants in the study” (Loh, 2013, p. 9-10). Further, this study provides utility (Loh, 2013), in it is “relevant for use by members of the research community or by members of the teaching community” (p. 10) in that any undergraduate student engaged in cultural experiences, (in this study, experiences abroad) may have similar deficits in understanding of “other” and can similarly learn through their lived experiences and encounters with different cultures.

According to Kolb’s model of experiential learning, “knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (1984, p. 41). As program director, it was my focus to provide experiential opportunities for the university students, both guided and independent. The result was an interactive schedule that sought to balance formal school observations and teaching, cultural immersion, tourism, independent research (choice of topics), and free time (unstructured and structured). In addition to active participation in experiential situations, pre-service teachers were expected to post personal blog entries, following Harvey and Goudvis’ Fact, Question, and Response (FQR) strategy (2000). FQR provides both concrete experiences and personal/professional reflection of events by recording facts (what was observed), questioning events (inquiry), and responding (to the new knowledge). iPad minis provided efficient means to record data through photos, videos, audio recordings and/or note-taking. The goal was that as the pre-service teachers began to narrow their research topic, their daily blog postings would serve as the data to facilitate creation of their final research presentations.

Multiple Cultures

In order to compare and contrast the multiple aspects of our observational experiences in Italian classrooms, it was necessary to work from an operational definition of culture. Nieto and Bode (2012) state: "Culture consists of the values, traditions, worldview, and social and political relationships created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, religion, or shared identity" (p. 158).

An obstacle to the pre-service teachers' learning was that through their own admission, they had not really thought about how their own culture had shaped them as people, until the Italian schoolchildren began to pose questions to them, such as, "What do Americans like to eat?" "What kind of music do Americans like?" and so on. These questions caused the pre-service teachers to ponder the variations even within the USA.

Italy is slightly larger than the state of Arizona. Although the city of Aosta (northwestern Italy) has approximately the same population and geographic area of our city, Valdosta, it is surrounded by the Alps, with Monte Bianco (Mont Blanc), the second-highest peak in Europe, only 45-minutes away. Monte Bianco rises 15,777 feet above sea level, whereas Georgia exists at sea level. This information helped both Italian and US American students geographically situate our countries.

The comparison of cultures also includes that until recently, Italy has been a predominantly White, Catholic country, with heritage being mostly Italian. According to CountryMeters, the current population is 59,854,876 with a negative population growth, (261,871 deaths in 2015, as opposed to 233,137 births), the annual external migration of 105,834 people, greatly impacts change in Italy's traditional cultural at an unprecedented rate. Italy is in a cultural state of flux; even in the rather remote areas we visited, immigrants were present.

During 2015, Italy had over 100,000 immigrants arrive, both legally and those seeking political asylum (BBC.com, 2016).

Revisiting Nieto and Bode's (2012) definition of culture, "the values, traditions, worldview, and social and political relationships..." are not necessarily shared with those of traditional Italian heritage. Small towns and large cities are being "...transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history... language, social class, religion, or shared identity" (p. 158). Italy has become the new geographic location for 153,842 refugees, predominately from African countries (85%) in 2016 (Connor, 2016). Italy is quickly becoming a multicultural country.

Study abroad offers students opportunities for constructing global competence. Gonyea (2008) noted that university students develop understanding of cultural diversity and perspectives on world affairs through study abroad, offering participation in a wide range of activities outside of one's own world. Perry & Southwell (2011) cite studies that indicate even short-term study abroad programs impact intercultural awareness and competencies among university students. To develop intercultural capabilities in such overseas programs, Williams (2005) suggests that students should actually interact with locals. That was our goal through pre-arranged school visits.

Settings

The schools visited were chosen with assistance of several Italian friends to coordinate with the particular educational pre-service teachers' interests—early childhood education. We participated in observations and facilitated mini-lessons in six schools (northern and central Italy), which do not typically attract many US American or other English-speaking visitors. These included: a private preschool (ages 3-6) in Correggio, two elementary schools and a

private agricultural high school in Aosta, and a middle grades and an elementary school in Marano sul Panaro).

The pre-service teachers (20-22 years of age; one male; one Black, African-American; 4 White, European Americans) and I had prepared several mini-lessons stemming from an US American wordless picture book (*Where's Walrus?* by Stephen Savage, 2011) and simple US American children's songs. The purpose of each mini-lesson was to serve as an icebreaker activity for the Italian children, (all who study English as a second or third language) to feel comfortable enough to talk and work with us in their classrooms. We had secured permissions with IRB approval. Packed with iPad minis, US American flag toothpicks, gifts for host teachers (including a copy of *Where's Walrus* and tote bags), we walked into our first Italian elementary school.

Italian Classrooms

I announced our arrival (in Italian) to a secretary in *Scuola Luigi Euandi*, in Valle D'Aosta. Although our expectation, based on experiences with the high security levels displayed in US American schools, was for a person of authority to meet us and to review paperwork, we were immediately directed to the first of two fifth grade classrooms, where, in halting Italian, I introduced ourselves to the teacher and aide, explaining to very attentive children, that we were from Valdosta, a city like theirs, in the USA. I asked the pre-service teachers to introduce themselves, noticing something that some would need to be corrected. This obvious cultural difference was something we discussed and later changed in subsequent school visits. The informality of US American English, "I'm Deb", confused the children. We noted during their introductions to us, each clearly stated, "My name is ____". Whereas the Italian children had more typically traditional Italian names, (i.e. Antonio, Maria, and Stefano), the pre-service teachers' names were not common US American ones: Greg, Jordan, Nancy, Shakela, and Schuyler, and

my husband, Ray. With unexpectedly unfamiliar names, southern accents, and the lack of preface, our communications faltered. From that point forward, we were sure to slow our speech and pronounce carefully. Our own experiential learning had just begun.

My partner is an artist, and when children asked about animals living near us, I showed a photo on my iPad mini of an alligator. The children were amazed at the ferocious animal, laughing and shouting out, “*Ho paura!* – I am afraid!” Ray immediately began to draw an alligator, step-by-step, on the white board. The children were excited and began drawing their own “Alligator”. This was a great transition from their initial shyness to our mini-lesson.

I had prepared a PowerPoint of directions for our activity, since the pre-service teachers spoke no Italian. The children were polite as I read the brief slides, and haltingly, one raised his hand to indicate I had misspelled *tricheco* (walrus) on one slide. His classmates seemed apprehensive of my response, but we all laughed that even university professors make mistakes!

The pre-service teachers lead small groups. Each had made a hand puppet of a character from the book, and the children seemed to enjoy holding it while they worked through the story. I purposefully had chosen a wordless picture book to facilitate comprehension through illustrations, an appropriate activity for all ages. The illustrations cleverly portray the antics of Walrus, as he escapes a boring zoo life, ready to explore the book’s setting, New York City. When the zookeeper realizes Walrus is gone, the search all over the city begins. Walrus eludes the zookeeper, camouflaging his grey body into a variety of settings: a chorus line, a diner counter, and a department store window, using minimal disguises. The children laughed and pointed while talking to the pre-service teacher in enough English to be understood. This seemed to be a perfect level of engagement, which gave the children an opportunity to utilize their English language skills.

The directions that followed were to draw where Walrus might hide from the zookeeper in their city. We were very pleasantly surprised at how quickly and relatively quietly the children pulled out their pencils, colored pencils, erasers, and rulers and got right to work. Building on the familiar, they drew places they knew, while talking animatedly within each small group. They were very engaged.

Since Aosta is located in the Alps, the children's drawings of Walrus frequently depicted snow or on the mountains, skiing, wearing a hat and scarf, and even as a St. Bernard rescue dog! Our favorite, however, was the Centurion costume, while Walrus posed in one of the archways of the Roman Theater ruins located in the center of town. The oblivious zookeeper looks all around, but cannot find Walrus. Their drawings demonstrated clear understanding of geographic identity, making connections between their work and where Walrus had hidden in the book. They were happy to share their drawings in the small groups. We gave each child a flag toothpick and helped poke it through the drawings (with their permission) to show Walrus holding the US American flag, as somewhat of a souvenir, appreciation for their participation.

As a culminating activity, we taught the children a song. We had prepared a booklet with the lyrics to several simple US American children's songs and listed the coordinating web sites where the song recordings could be found, for their future use. The children stood and we taught the song "Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes". Most children knew the vocabulary for the various body parts in English, but connecting them in a song with hand motions proved more complicated. Even the teachers in the room participated, and it was a fun experience.

Again, we were impressed that despite whole body movements (that increased in speed with each repetition) involved in the song, singing in a third language, since in Aosta, French is the second language, and lots of laughter, the children were very well-behaved. The teacher

never raised her voice or gave warnings for inappropriate behavior. As we were finishing up, one of the children asked permission to sing a French song they had just learned.

It was a pleasure working with these students, who all seemed eager to speak English, and with their teachers, who were more reticent. As we waited in the hall to repeat this lesson in the classroom next door, we viewed artwork that hung on the walls. These were the children's interpretations of world-famous paintings, including *The Scream*, a self-portrait of Van Gogh, and Monet's water lilies. The pre-service teachers noted the arts integration in this Italian school. In the second classroom, we had similar interactive experiences, but we were now more comfortable and the lesson flowed more easily. The Italian students and teachers expressed much excitement and appreciation. There was a sense of relief and satisfaction from the pre-service teachers, as they posed for photos, seemed more relaxed in their small groups. They were still amazed to see snowcapped mountains outside the classroom windows. Their exuberant personalities and teaching skills definitely provided a comfort zone for them—a universal language: working with children. We repeated these activities at the *Scuola St. Roch Ponte di Pietra* two more times, and again, the children were polite, engaged, and respectful. We enjoyed ourselves immensely and began to compare and contrast these experiences between schools and those in America. This was the beginning of the teacher candidate's research, as they recorded their observations and themes began to emerge.

During the year prior to this trip, a high school teacher, Elena, in Aosta, had contacted me through my university, after she became aware a city named Valdosta existed in the USA. Through email, we made arrangements to meet during the portion of our study abroad program spent in Valle D'Aosta. During that year, she became instrumental with suggestions for places to visit, helped with hiring a bus company, and arranged for us to visit her English classes at *Institut Agricole*, a private high school program for students planning employment in a variety of

agricultural careers. These students, (10th and 11th grades) were better able to hold conversations beyond what we had experienced in the elementary schools.

Although we used the same wordless picture book, it was fun and appropriate for these emergent English learners. Our combined students spent the day talking, participating in our mini-lesson, sharing US American culture (especially Jelly Bellies) and having lunch together. This was a large farming community, yet another subculture for us to learn about. The students were all from multiple generations of families in regional industries: dairy farming (milk for local yogurt and Fontina cheese, famous from this region), cured meats, vegetables, and vineyards (grapes for both eating and wine making).

Our visits to the *Scuola Ghidoni Mandriolo*, a public pre-school in Correggio, and the Malaguzzi Center in Reggio Emilia increased our understandings of this world-renowned child-centered approach to early education. The headmaster of the Mandriolo School not only warmly welcomed us, but also displayed genuine passion and pride for the school's hands-on philosophy in action. We were amazed at the depth of artistic, creative, and critical thinking demonstrated by the three to five-year olds enrolled there. In addition to immersion in free choice and directed activities, the children developed competency in decision-making, self-responsibility, and inquiry. We were all very inspired by this school.

Immersion into Italian Culture

Although the pre-service teachers were on their own for most meals, I made arrangements to introduce them into Italian food culture the night we arrived at a local wine bar (*enoteca*) to sample local meats, cheeses, bread, and yes, wine. My husband and I had enjoyed this establishment in previous visits and were excited to share our find with the students. Our gastronomic culture shock was that only one of the VSU students remotely liked the cheese or meat varieties we were served. They took tiny bites and after what they perceived to be an

appropriately respectful time sitting with us, asked to be excused to find a restaurant that sold hamburgers. We laughed, but as they left, we directed the students to our favorite *gelato* store, hoping they would give the ice cream a chance. They did!

Food became an issue in that understandably, the pre-service teachers did not want to spend money on food they might not like. Although there is a difference between US American's version of "Italian" food and *real* Italian food, which is mostly organic and made-to-order, I wanted the students to be open to the gastronomic culture as well. I was slightly concerned because before this, it had never occurred to me that the students might not like the food in Italy. This served to widen my pre-conceived multicultural notions, that everyone at least would sample what is available. I was surprised and unsure how to assist the pre-service teachers in having the freedom to choose to not dine with us for each meal, but also to help them find meals they would like. For each city, one of their first desires was to find a McDonald's or other US-based restaurants. They agreed to order appetizer-sized portions until they found something they liked. Several pre-service teachers were very open to trying just about anything, but it took a while for everyone. There were also many comments like, on the day we visited an orchard, "I've never eaten a cherry before."

The slow food practice in Italy and most of Europe, means that meals are leisurely with multiple-courses. In the schools that offered us a repast, I noticed napkins surreptitiously covering finger foods with only one bite taken. The male pre-service teacher stated, "I never really hit on any meats and cheeses that I thoroughly enjoyed. When we went to our first fancy sit-down restaurant, I found some awesome spaghetti. It wasn't like Mama makes, but it was still real tasty... Italy isn't big on ice, either," something he was used to having in every drink at home. At a meal at our friends' home, where everything was either made fresh that day or picked from their vegetable garden, again, we were surprised to hear about foods they had never

eaten before. This family even made their own balsamic vinegar, made over a 27-year process. The pre-service teachers were beginning to notice the organic nature, traditions, and homemade preparation of food in Italy. Several commented that Italians take pride in growing and preparing their food as much as eating it.

Since only one of the pre-service teachers was Catholic, I wondered about their reaction to visiting so many Catholic churches, housing some of Italy's best art and history. However, all are Christian, so they did enjoy stopping in the churches, especially in the heat of the summer afternoons. They noticed the details in carvings, sculptures, mosaics, and the omnipresent frescoes depicting familiar Biblical stories. By the number of photos they were taking, I got the sense they were appreciating this religious part of Italian culture; similar to their own understandings, while still different.

The pre-service teachers were required to record observations from "people watching" in public spaces, in addition to the school visits to expand their cultural experiences in a variety of settings. Some categories that emerged included: clothing, public displays of affection, child care, and dining. In addition to going to the top of Mont Blanc, our tourist activities included riding a water taxi in Venice, climbing Brunelleschi's Dome in Florence, tours of a Parmesan cheese and balsamic vinegar factories, and visiting an orchard, many churches, museums, and piazzas, concluding with a day trip to Pompeii, and a Sunday public audience with Pope Francis.

Our group had a private tour of the *Selva Contrada* (one of 17 wards within the city of Siena) church and museum, and have dinner at the social club. This provided an in-depth view of the all-encompassing culture the *Palio* (horserace) has on Siena's community identity. Again, the locals with whom we engaged were warm and welcoming throughout our interactions. This cultural connection continued for us long after returning to the United States. When *Selva*

became the winner of August 2015's hotly contested race, the club's president sent an email soon thereafter stating that our visit had brought them good luck. They had not won since 2006!

As testament to their newly gained comfort level with Italian culture, the pre-service teachers mastered use of both the bus and metro systems of Rome, on their own. Although they were very aware of possible pickpockets, who often prey on tourists, my students remained safe by traveling together and being alert. The GPS on their smart phones helped, too!

Cultural Realizations

Coming from a rural US American background, the pre-service teachers had few, if any, experiences with art museums. I had wondered about their reactions to the portrayals of the human body in Italian art. One female highlighted this in her research: "Italian art is easily recognizable and much of it represents man in his natural form – nude... Everywhere, there are sculptures or paintings of naked men, women, or children. While incredible, what fascinated me most was seeing...that such art work is viewed as a representation of beauty and not vulgarity."

The pre-service teachers continued to miss US American food, and despite the high cost, purchased Cokes on a daily basis. They took every opportunity to get hamburgers and fries wherever they could. The iPad minis afforded them Facetime with significant others, friends, and family, and upon arriving at every hotel, immediately requested Wi-Fi passwords, even before getting room keys! Other than that, there was a great appreciation of the art, (especially the Sistine Chapel, the Pieta', and *David*), castles, the Grand Canal, and the trip to the top of Monte Bianco. Several of the university students had never seen snow before, and it was fun to watch one build a foot-high snowman there. This attracted visitors from other countries as they watched and photographed the process!

In addition, two students had never been on a plane before, so the impact of crossing the Atlantic and being seated for nine hours was a huge cultural change. The students slept for most

of the two-hour drive from landing in Milan to our first destination of Valle D'Aosta and watching their facial expressions as they awoke in the middle of the Alps was almost worth the trip in itself.

Being in a place where they heard no English took some getting used to, but the university students learned some simple phrases and made the adjustment rather quickly. Since the group was small, and the students were friends prior to travel, they learned from and with one another, forming a solid safe and supportive unit. They learned that it was cheaper to shop in a grocery store than to eat in restaurants for every meal, learned the conversion from US dollars to Euros fairly quickly, and how to bargain in the weekly marketplaces.

Most of the Italian adults we met were hesitant to speak English. There seemed to be a sense of embarrassment that although they had studied English in school, they were unable to speak it in adulthood. They understood much more English than they were able to verbalize, which in language learning is true – listening comprehension occurs first. However, as the Italians invited us to speak their language, we also encouraged them to try English providing much head shaking and miming. This is one moment that VSU students recognized that this experience may become useful in their future teaching of students who are emerging English learners.

For the pre-service teachers, the classroom interactions were most enjoyable, realizing that this was where they felt most comfortable, doing something they already knew how to do: teach, as they had completed two practica through previous coursework. The hospitable reception in the Italian schools put everyone at ease. We experienced school lunches on three different days, making comparisons to the noise level, the healthy food the Italian children were eating, and the wonderful table manners exhibited as compared to our US American schools.

One teacher candidate was so impressed with the quality of the fresh food; she completed her final paper on the field-to-table process.

Intercultural Relationships

Without my personal connections, the warmth of the Italians, and the culture of hospitality, I know this trip would not have afforded all of us the level of immersion as we experienced. In general, we were treated like celebrities, welcomed, and made to feel important. Much of this program's success was a result of pre-planning and cultivating contacts. Our friends in Marano sul Panaro made arrangements for use to meet with their town's mayor on my scouting trip. During the study abroad program, the mayor of Marano sul Panaro welcomed us in City Hall, escorted us to the middle and elementary schools, and took time from her schedule to meet us at the school for lunch, and provided gifts for us to take home.

This small town had one elementary, middle, and nursery school. Although all students in Italy study English, this town is off the beaten path, so there were few opportunities with native English-speakers. Our friends not only shuttled us around (with assistance of their friend, who also photographed our school and city hall visits), but made arrangements to visit the nearby balsamic vinegar and Parmesan cheese factories. The mayor further extended herself to arrange with a colleague for our visit to the Reggio Emilia inspired pre-school 45-minutes away. This genuine cordiality was beyond any of our expectations.

The male pre-service teacher's journal described our first impressions of the *Scuola di Amicis* in the very small town of Marano sul Panaro: "I was hit by an amazing scene! This was the most warming welcoming I have ever experienced. The children from the school were all outside [in the garden] and started singing when we walked up! They sang three different songs for us. I could tell they had all worked very hard and it made us feel very special!" We were provided lunches (three courses each) in the school cafeteria for two days and our friends treated

us to gelato during several excursions, snacks at a local street fair, and hosted a dinner for our group in their home.

While in Valle D'Aosta, Elena brought us to one of the castles in the Aosta Valley, (viewing the recreational culture of the last king of Italy) accompanied us to Monte Bianco, arranged for tea, cocoa, and snacks at her cousin's five-star resort hotel in the Alps one afternoon, as well as opening her high school classes to us, described above. She accompanied us to dinners during our stay, and arranged for us to meet with the Dean of Early Childhood Education at the *Università della Valle D'Aosta* (UVDA), a small university that shares our university's name. Elena's generosity extended to gifts of aprons for each of us and tea towels for the men, decorated with the map and decorations of her town, Sarre'.

The cultural understandings of the study abroad experiences were not limited to events in Italy. Opening eyes extended to other practices. One pre-service teacher asked me why I brought gifts to the school principals, teachers, and to our friends. My Italian heritage has taught me that one never goes to another's house (or classroom) without a hostess gift. This concept seemed new to the university students. The generosity of time and spirit of those who helped us came at no cost to our program. Our gifts were received with delight. In the small town of Marano sul Panaro, I donated 15 US American picture books to the teachers. Within a matter of minutes, the books were on a dedicated shelf in the library. Expression of gratitude is a must.

Conclusions

Ungar (2016), in his support of studying abroad, suggests "...the United States would be able to function far more effectively if its people and its leaders felt more comfortable in the world" (NP). I wonder if the world might function more effectively if more US Americans visited other countries. During this trip, we were, in essence, US ambassadors. Whether making purchases at a local store, buying a gelato, or teaching in classrooms, we represented not only

our university, but also the United States of America. As the program goals of debunking stereotypes for the pre-service teachers were evident, we were also serving to break down stereotypes of the typical US American to those with whom we came in contact. The Italians around us were observing our behavior, dress, manners, and actions. Even small gestures, of nodding hello or saying, “*Buon giorno*” (Good day), demonstrated that we US Americans are respectable. For many Italians, we may well be the only multicultural experience they ever have with US Americans. We hope we made a good impression and perhaps removed some perception of the “Ugly American”.

It made me sad as I noticed a Muslim mother walking near one of the schools we visited, appearing worried about what we US Americans were doing with the group of children that included her son, as he held the US American flag toothpick we had given to all the children. The teacher assured me that it would be okay, as she went over to explain to the mother. Later that afternoon, that mother and son noticed my husband and me at an outdoor café, as the boy excitedly waved to us. I smiled and nodded. After a few seconds, the mother smiled and nodded back, apparently relieved she and her son were not in any danger. It is understandable, that if this mother had never encountered an US American, how would she know our group to be different from a stereotype she had of US Americans? Cultural understanding is multifaceted.

Participating in this study abroad program resulted in increased cultural awareness for all of us. The pre-service teachers became adept at using iPad minis, creating many videos and photos. Although WIFI was available in all our hotels, service was limited. Blog entries did not get posted regularly, and while traveling between locations, several days’ worth of information was often combined into Word documents in order to catch up. Future trips may involve dedicated Internet service devices.

The careful design and structure of this four-week program, starting in a small town Aosta, and progressing through increasingly larger and more multicultural locales opened our eyes through experiences in a foreign country. From an educational standpoint, this cultural immersion provided scaffolding of the pre-service teacher's newly created knowledge, stimulating reflection, and developing comfort zones and confidence that allowed them to feel able to explore further in a constructivist manner. Successes of the program are also evidenced by professional conference presentations for two of the pre-service teachers and myself, this article, and several others in process.

One pre-service teacher's journal entry summed up her new understandings: "My experiences in Italy have brought me to observe how most of the cultural aspects of slowing down life and taking in [one's] surroundings, to be able to enjoy growing and learning... During my study abroad, I became the student again and Italy became my teacher." Another noted, "Whether one is looking at the art of Italy or the restaurants, classrooms, and piazzas its people inhabit, a strong sense of tradition and family can be found."

These insights indicate that the program's goals of opening eyes through opening classroom doors were met, whereby the immersion into a different culture allowed new visions and deeper comprehension of multiculturalism. These experiences will not end with the return to the United States. The male pre-service teacher concludes his journal with: "I cannot wait for the day in my own classroom when I will pull out pictures of amazing artwork, when my students need inspiration. I am going to be able to show my students famous artworks, such as Michelangelo's *David*, and explain that I got to see it in person. As a young man with very little travel experience, Italy became a great source of cultural learning that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. This different learning experience will allow me to have an open mind to the

different cultural backgrounds that my future students may have. I now have a greater insight on how a world different than mine works.”

At a time of worldwide cultural unrest, it seems more important to refrain from making mass conclusions about members of particular groups. We are members of the human race, and xenophobia too often keeps us from getting to know others who are different in some way. Whether through blogs, handwritten journals, postcards, Instagram, or Facebook comments, the ‘book’ of new multicultural understandings was being written, opened through this study abroad. The pages do not reflect only the incredible transformation of thinking for these university students, but for all whom we encountered. All of us have walked away from these experiences slightly different, perhaps more tolerant, less scared of “other”. We have read the world book, not just a page, and hopefully, like all good books, it should be read again and again. And we have become storytellers.

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