U.S. Students Abroad: Lessons from Rome in Cultural Immersion

John Felice Rome Center
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ELPS 529: Selected Topics in Higher Education
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Seminar Overview
This seminar is designed to enable students to explore multiple aspects of the education abroad experience of U.S. undergraduate students from the unique vantage point of personally experiencing a short-term, education abroad immersion simultaneously with focused study of this topic. The international city of Rome is each student’s “learning laboratory” and serves as the cultural context for the exploration of study abroad. Students are challenged to reflect on their own personal experience as they undertake their academic sojourn in Rome and to integrate their learning experiences with the research and topics that the course addresses. While time in a formal classroom occurs minimally we use that time for discussion and reflection on key topics related to education abroad. The course utilizes ‘engaged learning’ by moving beyond the traditional classroom setting into the city of Rome thus enabling students to engage with each other and with key informants at selected cultural, educational, religious, and historical sites within the city. In many respects, all classroom and out of classroom experiences while in Rome are viewed as valuable in gaining a holistic understanding and appreciation for the course—even while the student is on his or her own and not engaged directly in course-related activities (e.g., while touring, while dining, while shopping, etc.).

Stakeholders. This course is ideal for learners seeking to explore and understand the intercultural dynamics involved in international study, those wishing to reflect and understand their own previous international study experience, those seeking to work in education abroad offices within colleges and universities and/or with international students who travel to the U.S. to study, those desiring to work at international campuses of U.S. colleges and universities, those planning to have responsibility for coordinating and leading educational excursions to other nations, and those with scholarly (teaching and research) interests broadly in international education.

This course is accessible to students with wide-ranging international experience including those with no education abroad experience to those with extensive engagement with study abroad. Often, but not always, engagement for the first time with a totally new culture may result in varying degrees of discomfort or disequilibrium (what researchers label as ‘culture shock’). Experienced sojourners in the class are invited to support and engage those in our learning community who may experience symptoms of culture shock in order to enhance all students’ learning.
Seminar Objectives

1. To enhance student understanding about the diverse missions, approaches, and structures of education abroad programs;
2. To contextualize study abroad programs within systems of student and academic mobility in the global economy;
3. To reflect on the challenges and issues experienced by students, coordinators, and administrators during study abroad;
4. To identify learning outcomes that may arise from different types of study abroad experiences;
5. To reflect on the personal impact of cultural immersion experiences while abroad, with special attention to transformative personal and professional experiences.

The Eternal City as Classroom

The city of Rome provides an exciting and culturally rich laboratory for student learning about cultural immersion through study abroad. Through visits to cultural, historical, educational, religious, governmental, and other sites and through talking directly with key informants, students will have the opportunity to examine their own immersion experiences while involved in scholarly exploration of the study abroad experience itself. The following field experiences reinforce and complement (i.e., ‘make real’) the topics under examination in this course.

- **Approaches to Study Abroad.** In an effort to gain an appreciation for different approaches to the provision of study abroad, we will visit selected campuses of both Italian and U.S. colleges/universities and meet with staff, faculty, and/or students to explore topics and themes from the literature that we address in this course. As enrolled students at the **John Felice Rome Center of Loyola University Chicago**, we will also compare and contrast our own program structure and experiences with those of other campuses we investigate.

  Students are asked to review each of the following websites carefully prior to arrival at each site.

  1. **Italiaidea** [www.italiaidea.com] (an Italian Language and Culture School)
  2. **John Felice Rome Center (JFRC)** [www.luc.edu/rome] (a U.S. university international campus)
  3. **Universita di Roma La Sapienza** [http://www.uniroma1.it] (an undergraduate and graduate Italian university founded in 1303)

- **International Dimensions of Teaching and Scholarship.** Meet with **Italian and U.S. faculty** to explore through a faculty lens the international dimensions of academic work and experiences with cultural immersion in international education. Many study abroad organizations in Rome rely on faculty and scholars from Italy and other nations as either full- or part-time faculty. Our class will meet with a small sample of these scholars through our engagement with JFRC, Italiaidea, American University Rome, and/or at the University of Rome La Sapienza.

- **Critical Reflections on Education Abroad.** Both through our in-class sessions and when out of class, students will engage with cultural, historical, geopolitical, religious and other experiences pertinent to study abroad. Throughout the course, students will be asked to collect data (e.g. ideas posed in class, journal entries, photographs, site visits, etc.) that elicit meaningful, discomforting, or surprising responses from them. These data will be used in a culminating final autoethnography that captures the key aspects of their Rome experience.

  Note: Students are asked to bring a camera and/or smart phone with digital photo capability and a travel guide for the city of Rome as these will be helpful for relevant class activities, especially the photo elicitation project.

- **Experiential Walks.** A possible disadvantage of short-term study abroad programs is that the immersion experience is too brief for most students to truly grasp the many subtleties of the local culture. This course acknowledges that, and instead turns the focus to helping students develop self-awareness by deeply engaging with specific aspects of an unfamiliar environment. What do we notice about the place? About others? About ourselves? To do so, groups of students will lead experiential walks/site visit, and facilitate activities that engage the class with the environment through a chosen theme.
• **Co-Curricular Activities.** Throughout the entire two week Loyola School of Education summer program at JFRC, all students will have the opportunity to participate in several program-wide co-curricular programs that will significantly enhance their education abroad cultural and educational experience. These programs include:
  - The Colosseum [http://greatbuildings.com/buildings/roman_colosseum.html] [note: see timeline link for information on other world class buildings in Rome]
  - Piazza Navona [www.romainteractive.com/pznavona.htm]
  - Vatican Museums [http://mv.vatican.va]
  - Student Selected Sites (see ‘Walks’ assignment)
  - Optional: In previous summers, our visit to Rome has coincided with scheduled performances (under the stars) of the Italian opera (or ballet) performed at the ancient ruins of the **Baths of Caracalla** in order to experience the grandeur of one of Italy’s most revered cultural traditions. The Verdi opera **Nabuco** is offered once during our visit to Rome on **July 11**. Depending on student interest, arrangements may be possible for a visit but attendance is not a requirement of the course (25 Euro for the least expensive ticket). The Opera begins at dusk (around 9 p.m. and lasts 2.5 hours). Buy tickets at http://www.operaroma.it/spettacoli/nabucco/

**Seminar Readings [Complete Prior to Arrival in Rome]**

Selected readings examining topics addressed in this course have been assembled and made available on the course Sakai site (https://sakai.luc.edu). Readings are found in the ‘Resources’ menu tab. Students are not required to bring print copies of any readings to Rome and will be able to access Sakai and the readings in the Information Commons at the JFRC.

Students are asked to complete the required readings prior to our first class session in Rome as these will be integrated into both formal and informal class discussions in the classroom setting and during site visits beginning with the first day of class (i.e., observation data collection at The Forum and historic center). While some classes may have a topic/theme/focus for the day (e.g., our visit to La Sapienza with a focus on student mobility across borders within the EU and on nature and scope of the Italian University), we will typically be exposed to multiple topics and themes during site visits.

**Seminar Assignments**

**Note:** Personal reflection is an important and meaningful part of any study abroad experience and accordingly students are asked to continuously reflect on their experience while in Rome. These reflections may be recorded electronically using computers at the Rome Center. **Students are advised not to bring laptops to Rome.** Students, however, are asked to bring a small journal booklet which they can easily carry to site visits so that they can pen observations, feelings, and questions while in the city and during class-based site visits.

- **Participation and Engagement in Class and at Field Sites [15 points].** Student participation includes an expectation that required readings are completed as these serve as an important foundation for all site visits and a measure of the extent of readiness we will have to engage with our various hosts (faculty, staff, students, etc.) who are generously giving their time to meet with us. Thoughtful consideration (both in advance and on site) regarding what questions and topics you wish to raise is very important.

  Informed by course readings and your own experiences, **students are asked to arrive in Rome with an initial list of questions/topics that you might ask key stakeholders** with whom the class will engage (e.g., Italian and U.S. faculty, Italian and U.S. campus administrators, and other informants). Thoughtful observation, questioning and listening at each site are expected.

- **Student-led Classroom Topical Discussion [20 points].** Given the ‘engaged learning’ seminar format, four small groups (4 groups of 2; 1 group of 3) will be identified and responsible for generating and leading a class discussion (with emphasis more on discussion than presentation) on topic relevant to education abroad. Each topic is broad by design in order to generate wide discussion. There are no absolute ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ views regarding these topics.
Because classroom-based discussion time is limited, groups should assume that all students will be prepared (through prior reading and reflection) to fully engage in the discussion—thus background/contextual presentation information should be limited to ensure good ‘coverage’ of the substantive ideas to be discussed.

- **Experiential Walk [20 points].** There will be 3 groups of 3 students plus 1 group of 2 (these are to be different groups from the topical discussion groups). The experiential walks will occur on Week 2. Your group must be prepared to lead the class in an on-site “walk” lasting between 1-1.5 hours (not including travel to site).

Students may select sites that offer historical, cultural, educational, religious, political, or other insights into the day-to-day lives of Italians. Students are asked to avoid, however, selecting major tourist sites (i.e., Pantheon, Trevi Fountain, or sites the full class visits, etc.) as their experiential site. Some of the themes to be explored include but are not limited to “Contrasts and contradictions,” “Macro/micro,” “The heart of culture,” “Learning to see/do,” “The foreign at home,” and others to be brainstormed in class.

This assignment asks each group to do the following:

- **Journal Reflections [5 points for each reflection or total 15 points].** You are asked to prepare three reflective journal entries on Sakai describing your personal reflections on your experience, the questions that have arisen for you related to education abroad, and new insights you have gained about your learning while in Rome. You may select a particular theme for each of the journals and focus your reflection on each theme. The journal entries should be supported with evidence through your experiences during site visits, the assigned reading, and other non-class-based personal experiences. You will use parts of these entries as part of your autoethnographic final project, so try to make the most of them.

Journals should be uploaded into Sakai using the Assignments tab. Each journal should be between 400-500 words (12 point font, double spaced).

- **Final reflection (30 points).** Students will use techniques drawn from biographical/autoethnographic research, as exemplified by Ramirez-Blanco (2013) to craft a 5-6 pages reflection. The ultimate purpose of this project is for students to reach their own interpretation of the following statement,

> [A]bove all, I am a reflective practitioner interested in exploring challenges and possibilities embedded in study abroad experiences with the intention of presenting insights that might inform and improve existing study abroad programs. I am interested in making a contribution to the field of International Education by dissecting some of the challenges that study abroad programs might present (Ramirez-Blanco, 2013, p. 3)

To do so, you’re asked to consider these three questions:
What knowledge did you gain from the study abroad experience that wouldn’t otherwise be acquired through exclusive classroom-based learning?

What unique learning processes occurred through participation in the course?

How will you apply this knowledge in your professional life?

This assignment is due Friday July 15 by midnight. Other than technical formatting (APA, 12 point font, double-spaced, you know the drill), this culminating document is otherwise fairly “free-form.” As long as you provide a thoughtful, well-argued reflection of your Rome experience, you may add any materials (e.g. photos, poems, news articles, etc.) you want as appendices (or incorporated into the main text, provided the 5-6 written reflection is clearly present) to illustrate specific moments, places, people, that were meaningful to your time in Rome. Remember you may use excerpts from your journal entries in the final reflection! Consider the totality of class time, field trips, host visits, and spare time as data-collection points to use in this final assignment.

Grading Protocol

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LUC Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework that emphasizes “Social Action through Education” guides instructional, extracurricular, and professional activities at Loyola’s School of Education. The Loyola School of Education faculty are dedicated to promoting professionalism in service of social justice by developing students’ knowledge, skills, ethics, and service to improve educational opportunities for all members of society. This course contributes to the realization of this framework by helping students to:

- Develop an understanding of, and ability to reflect critically on, historical and contemporary issues within higher education;
- Reflect on how higher education actors can address these issues in a just society;
- Strengthen a personal and professional commitment to social justice;
- Foster an appreciation of and respect for diverse perspectives, cultures, lifestyles, ways of knowing, etc., and a commitment to serving others.

Additionally, students will demonstrate the following competencies related to analytical inquiry:

- The ability to develop and support reasonable and logically sound interpretations;
- The ability to analyze various organizational, curricular, fiscal, legal, cultural, and historical structures, models, policies, and professional practices from multiple points of view and theoretical perspectives;
- The ability to continually assess and improve one’s own analytical abilities.

IDEA Outcomes

The following learning outcomes are considered either essential or important based on the IDEA course rating system:

- Gaining a basic understanding of the subject (e.g., factual knowledge, methods, principles, generalizations, theories)
- Developing knowledge and understanding of diverse perspectives, global awareness, or other cultures
- Developing specific skills, competencies, and points of view needed by professionals in the field most closely related to this course
• Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view

**IDEA Course Evaluation Link for Students**
At the end of the course you are expected to evaluate your learning experience through the IDEA system. Please follow this link to access the *Student IDEA Log In*: http://luc.edu/idea/

**Dispositions**
All students in the course will be assessed across the following dispositional areas: Professionalism, Fairness, and the Belief that all students can learn. The rubric can be found in Appendix C of the syllabus. The assessments will be conducted at the end of the semester through LiveText.

**Diversity**
Loyola’s School of Education is committed to the value of diversity in all of its courses. This course presents and encourages diverse perspectives on higher education policy, with a special focus on critical perspectives that promote social justice imperatives in analyses of and for policy. The course content is intended to provide a broad perspective on some of the most pressing policy concerns in higher education in the US and in the world, including equitable access and success, higher education as a public good, and the equitable distribution of knowledge. This course addresses these issues and invites students to critically reflect on them for their own current and future professional practice in higher education.

**Syllabus Addendum Link**: http://luc.edu/education/syllabus-addendum/
Please follow the link above to access the full SOE policies regarding the following items:
• Academic Honesty
• Accessibility
• Conceptual Framework
• EthicsLine Reporting Hotline
• Electronic Communication Policies and Guidelines