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"The Constellations were in a Different Place": Using Blogs to Understand Student Learning During Study Abroad

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“THE CONSTELLATIONS WERE IN A DIFFERENT PLACE”: USING BLOGS TO
UNDERSTAND STUDENT LEARNING DURING STUDY ABROAD

by

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ABSTRACT

While a great deal of research has been done on the pedagogical implications and uses of blogging, and even more research has been done on the effects of study abroad, few studies have investigated the use of blogging as a way that learning is processed during study abroad. This study sought to understand how students use blogs during a study abroad semester and the ways in which the blogs reveal evidence of learning. Eleven blogs, written by students at the University of South Carolina (USC) during their respective semesters abroad, were read, coded, and analyzed in order to answer the research questions. Nine major themes of learning emerged: culture, food, travel, transportation, language, academics, people, reflection, and acknowledgement of learning. These written experiences were then compared with the known effects of study abroad, and also juxtaposed with the USC Study Abroad Learning Outcomes. Based on what is already known about student learning during study abroad and on USC's Study Abroad Learning Outcomes, it was revealed that study abroad students write extensively and in surprising ways about their learning experiences on their personal blogs. Blogs may offer an alternative to the post-study abroad evaluations, instead capturing the student learning as it is occurring during the crux of the study abroad journey, and allowing researchers to see the context of the learning experiences.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO STUDY

Introduction

Although many studies have been conducted on the ways in which study abroad affects students, these studies primarily ask students to recall his or her previous program and the accompanying encounters (Cooley, E., & Savicki, V., 2011; Dolby, N., 2004; Ellwood, C., 2011; Franklin, K., 2010; Gesinski, B., English, L., & Tyson, L. E., 2010; Gillespie, J., Braskamp, L., & Dwyer, M., 2009; McKeown, 2009; Savicki, V., 2010). There is an obvious disadvantage, though, to asking a student to evaluate his or her study abroad experience upon return to the United States. The temporal focus of student reflection has been lodged primarily in the post-study abroad period of a student's life; the before and during stages have not been fully explored. While a student may be able to articulate a concrete way that study abroad has impacted her personal life—she might say she has become more independent—there is much more going on beneath the surface of such a response. And, if the student is asked to elaborate, she may, again, merely brush the tip of a much larger phenomenon, because she will be recounting an incident from weeks or months ago.

What if we could read about students' experiences as they were occurring, or at least within hours or days? What if there were a way to read the journals of study abroad students, to follow their learning, transitions, growth, and challenges through personal writings, photographs, and videos? Because this is the twenty-first century and because the internet is as much a part of life as getting dressed in the morning, it is obvious that

such a tool exists. Blogs cannot be considered the same as a private journal; however, the primary purpose is the same: a medium through which to write down one's thoughts, feelings, happenings, opinions, stories, and virtually anything else the author wishes. There could be changes occurring within a student that he or she does not even recognize, but the development or learning might be assessed through a well-articulated blog post.

The online journals written by students who are traveling abroad are important because they might reveal how students are actually achieving the learning outcomes (Andergassen, et al., 2009; Chan, et al., 2012; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Halic, et al., 2010; Lee, 2011; Paulus, 2009; Xie, & Sharma, 2011). Ten or twenty years ago, students who studied overseas were keeping a private journal, snapping some pictures for a coffee table scrapbook, or sending update emails to their closest family and friends. Now, with the introduction of the blog, these same students can write about their journey to a potential audience of millions. Not only that, but readers have access to thousands of student stories at the mere click of a button. A recent Google search for "study abroad blog" revealed over 11,000,000 results, the top hit being "The Study Abroad Blog," which claims to be "the ultimate study abroad resource" (Nault, 2012). If students are studying abroad and inviting the world to join in on their journey, then perhaps these first-hand student accounts are more valuable to the higher education community than they seem.

While there is a fairly large body of research on the pedagogical advantages to blogging (Andergassen, et al., 2009; Chan, et al., 2012; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Halic, et al., 2010; Lee, 2011; Paulus, 2009; Xie & Sharma, 2011), only one of these studies (Lee, 2011) addresses the implications of blogging on a student's study abroad

experience. Lee (2011) conducted a study with 16 undergraduate students who were participating in a semester-long study abroad program. These students were also participating in a blog program through which they were encouraged to practice their language skills and assigned writing topics by a teacher. The study focuses on regulated and directed blogging, albeit during a study abroad semester, rather than on the ways in which a student directs himself in the writing and learning process through the blog. With only limited knowledge of how travelers utilize the blogosphere independently, without teacher prompting, there is an even larger gap in terms of the student traveler—and more specifically, the study abroad student.

Study Abroad in 2012

In 2007, the United States government was asked to see and support study abroad among US university students as a national imperative when the *Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act of 2007* was introduced. In order to ensure “that more United States students have the opportunity to acquire...language skills and international knowledge through significantly expanded study abroad” (H.R.1469, March, 2007; S.991, March, 2007), a goal of at least one million university students studying abroad every year by 2017 was proposed (Gemignani, 2009, p. 3). Although reintroduced in 2009 (S.473, February, 2009), this bill has still not been signed into a law as of 2013; NAFSA: Association of International Educators and many other higher education and educational exchange organizations, including the University of South Carolina, the University of Missouri, Northern Illinois University, and the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), have publicly supported the legislation (Kostiuk, 2007; Parisi, 2007; Trooboff, 2010). In November 2011, Senator Dick Durbin announced his

plans to reintroduce the bill, recognizing that global competence among American students is an “absolute imperative” for the future of our nation (Durbin, 2011, p. 1).

According to the *2011 Open Doors Report*, published by the Institute of International Education and funded by the US Department of State, only 270,604 university students in the US studied abroad for academic credit during the 2009-2010 school year. While this is a 3.9% increase over the previous year, and participation in study abroad among US students has more than tripled in the past twenty years, these numbers are thought to continue to increase due in large part to the charge set forth by the aforementioned *Simon Act* (Institute of International Education, 2011; Picard, et. al. 2009).

Some institutions have incorporated study abroad into mandatory curriculum. For example, USC’s widely recognized international business program requires students to participate in a semester abroad at one of over 20 exchange partner universities, while Goucher College requires that every student, regardless of major, participates in study abroad in order to graduate (Fischer, 2008). Provosts and presidents are finding support among their boards of trustees for making study abroad an institutional priority, “even at public universities where it often comes at the cost of generating tuition revenue” (Lewin, 2009, xiii).

Evidence for this nationwide institutional support can be found in the Shared Futures: Global Learning and Social Responsibility program developed by the Association of American College and Universities (AACU), of which thirty two colleges and universities are a part. Shared Futures, a multi-project initiative, claims that its partners “committed to liberal education have important civic responsibilities to their

communities, their nation, and the larger world. Global learning is the pathway through which students become prepared to fulfill these responsibilities” (AACU, n.d.). The 2011 *Open Doors Report*, which relies on the data compiled from universities and colleges across the country, reveals that more of these institutions are carefully tracking data, developing strategic marketing campaigns, and utilizing former study abroad students both in and out of the study abroad office (Institute for International Education, 2011).

The Provost of the University of South Carolina (USC), Dr. Michael Amiridis, in 2012 charged the Office of International Programs with an institutional goal: send at least 2000 students studying abroad every year by 2016. The USC Study Abroad Office oversaw 984 students’ education abroad experiences—including study, internship, volunteering, and research—in the 2010-2011 school year, so the Provost’s goal means more than doubling this number in four years. Annually, the Study Abroad Office compiles a Post-Study Abroad Program Evaluation Report (PSAPER), which documents the academic, personal, and cultural outcomes of study abroad, as well as student satisfaction with their program, through a voluntary survey sent to returnees. The questions on the survey are based on the study abroad learning outcomes that USC has identified (Appendix A). Similar reports, discussed further in Chapter II, are being compiled across the US by institutions and studies that are seeking to capture and explain the student learning that occurs during study abroad.

The Blogosphere in 2012

Simultaneous to the growth of study abroad among American university students is the rapid growth of technology and internet use around the world. According to a January 2012 report by the Royal Pingdom blog, there were over 109 million blogs on

WordPress and Tumblr alone by the end of 2011 (Royal Pingdom Blog, 2012). This figure does not include the myriad other blog domains, including Google's Blogger, whose undisclosed number of users published over half a billion posts in 2010 (Blogger Buzz, 2011). Blogs, which have arguably been around since the early 1990s, have become a platform for millions of people across the world to write and share anything that they feeling like sharing. The implications that this mass move to self-publication has on the journalism field as well as the definition of literature has been widely discussed since blogs' popularity skyrocketed in the post-9/11 United States (Barlow, 2008; Lindemann, 2010; Mooney, 2003; Pudliner, 2007; Rosenberg, 2009; Singh, 2008).

A graduate student in history at The Johns Hopkins University, W. Caleb McDaniel, presented a well-crafted argument for the case of "why bloggers belong in the history of reading" (McDaniel, 2005, subtitle) in his article "Blogging in the Early Republic." Comparing the dawn of the printing press in an antebellum America to the twenty-first information age, McDaniel (2005) concludes that blogging and the resulting phenomenon is quite similar to the sudden "unprecedented access to reading material" that nineteenth century Americans experienced (par. 22). McDaniel's unique comparison caught the attention of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which subsequently published a review of the article, concluding that, "by sharing their thoughts and interests with like-minded readers, bloggers are also creating reading communities similar to ones that formed two centuries ago" (Breslow, 2005, par. 4). McDaniel's argument is significant because it recognizes the value of blog writing as a part of the way that we process thoughts and make meaning of experiences; although it is the "newest of newcomers," as

McDaniel (2005) calls blogging (par. 6), it has become an integrated and important facet of our culture of writing.

Unaccounted for in McDaniel's claim is the ease, and therefore multiplicity, with which a writer can self publish his or her own thoughts, musings, or ideas. In a concept that is now known as "oversharing," or "the compulsion to tell the online world too much about yourself," (Rosenberg, 2009, p. 17) blogging, online journaling, and social media have become a part of daily life in the twenty-first century. Sites like Tumblr, Blogger, Facebook, and Twitter make it possible for anyone with internet access—34.3% of the world population in 2012 (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2012)—to share personal information with anyone else who has internet access. Not only is personal information being passed from IP address to IP address at the click of a button, but also the student experience is broadcast through the easily accessible writings of someone in another part of the world.

Study Abroad and Blogging

As these two twenty-first century realities, study abroad and blogging, simultaneously develop into trends within higher education, they also continue to become more and more important to each other. As more US college students go abroad, more users are signing up for a Tumblr or Blogger site in order that they might have a platform from which to share their meaningful experiences. In the Facebook or "oversharing" generation, experiences—especially the ones that involve learning—are not always kept personal, merely scribbled absentmindedly in a spiral notebook at the end of a long week. Rather, these events may be thoughtfully and intentionally described through some combination of writing, photography, and videography.

The potential for study abroad blogs to impact the future of higher education is, as of yet, unknown. However, Myers (2010) summarizes the recent and still developing acceptance of general blogs as valid and reliable:

...after years of being about to be really big, blogs now really *are* very big.

Newspapers seriously discuss the influence of bloggers on the selection of the last US Democratic Presidential candidate; newspaper and broadcast journalists have their own blogs; and many of the best blogs lead to book publication...And they are now regularly the topic of academic conference papers and PhD dissertations (p. 2).

So it follows that, if blogs are used for documentation of national events and possible publication, then students may be using them to process and make meaning of important learning opportunities. Blogs of university students who are articulating their study abroad experiences should not only be read, but recognized as contributing, even in small ways, to the broader process of student learning. Glicker (2010) articulates this necessity in his case study of the student blogger: “We can honor the voice of our students by listening to them and valuing individual differences in their expressions of ideas” (p.24). Furthermore,

Educational blogging is about continually seeking to foster social interaction. Educational blogs become a web through which people around the world can exchange cultural perspectives and increase their appreciation for the infinite diversity that is the human story (Glicker, 2010, p. 24).

While Glicker (2010) makes a strong point for the student blogger, his claim is not directed toward the study abroad student blogger. Beyond being used as marketing and

advertising tools, these student travel narrations are, among the academe, largely ignored, or at the least, are seen as important merely to the moment or to the individual, but not to the student learning and meaning-making process during study abroad.

TABLE 1.1 Basic Description of Sample

#	Pseudonym	Location	# of Words	Blogger Type
1	Alice	Netherlands	~ 7,500	USC
2	Ashley	England	~ 20,000	Independent
3	Ellen	Australia	~ 5,500	Independent
4	Henry	Japan	~ 2,500	Independent
5	Kevin	Czech Rep.	~ 13,500	Independent
6	Lynne	Wales	~ 28,000	USC
7	Nancy	China	~ 28,500	USC
8	Natalie	New Zealand	~ 16,000	Independent
9	Nicole	Italy	~ 11,000	USC
10	Tom	Spain	~ 18,000	Independent
11	Yvonne	Spain	~ 9,000	Independent

The problem, then, is quite clear. There are nearly 300,000 US college students studying abroad every year, with a proposed national goal of 1,000,000 by 2017. At the same time, there are over 100 million blogs, each one being used as a platform for a voice. Current university students, as part of the generation who has grown up in the technology and internet boom, are no doubt asserting their presence in the blogosphere, but the lack of data available on just how many study abroad students utilize a blog during their overseas study and, more importantly, what can be learned by the students who do, points to a gap in the research. This study will seek to identify the most common themes that students choose to write about in their study abroad blogs, how these themes point to USC's study abroad learning outcomes, and whether or not evidence of student learning, based on these outcomes, can be identified. The research questions for this study are:

1. What do study abroad participants choose to write about in their blogs while they are studying abroad?
2. Do these various stories document the known effects of study abroad, and if so, how?
3. How is student learning—cultural, personal, and academic—evident in the study abroad blog, if at all?

Through a qualitative analysis of 11 study abroad blogs, this study answers these questions. Table 1.1 provides a snapshot of the sample used in this study. These blogs, written by students at the University of South Carolina (USC) during their respective study abroad semesters between Spring 2011 and Fall 2012, have been thoroughly read, coded, and analyzed in order to reveal the most common themes that emerge, specifically those that can be connected back to USC's study abroad learning outcomes.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

There is very little, if any, formal research on study abroad blogs. Apart from Pudliner's (2007) examination of the tourist traveler's weblog and the implications these sites have on the tourist industry, a limited amount of research has been conducted on the students who choose to journal publicly about their overseas experiences, and specifically their overseas academic experiences. Because of the lack of research on my specific topic area, this literature review will highlight research done in the areas that surround my research questions: study abroad, blogging, and travel blogging. Through articles and research, I reveal the gaps in the literature, and the questions that have emerged as a result. Since this study looks specifically at the student learning that occurs during a study abroad program, I define and explain student learning as it will be applied in this context. I also present literature through the definition of additional terms that are used throughout this study.

Definition of Terms

STUDENT LEARNING: For the purposes of this study, *student learning* will be defined based on David Kolb's (1984) Theory of Experiential Learning and the USC Study Abroad Learning Outcomes (Appendix A). The USC Study Abroad Learning Outcomes is a comprehensive list of the knowledge or skills a student should have acquired after studying abroad across three categories: academic, cultural, and personal. These learning outcomes are used in the USC Study Abroad Office for assessment

purposes, and also to encourage participants to consider the purpose and goals of their study abroad experience.

Learning, defined by Kolb (1984) is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). In his Cycle of Learning, Kolb (1985) describes four stages that make up this transformation: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The concrete experience implies active involvement and participation in learning; reflective observation implies the introspective thoughts about these experiences; abstract conceptualization refers to the forming of ideas that come from the previous reflections; and active experimentation is the processing of these ideas into actual actions or new experiences. Based on Kolb’s (1984, 1985) Theory of Experiential Learning, *student learning*, in this study, refers to the experiences that a student undergoes during which he or she acquires new knowledge, ideas, or opinions.

STUDY ABROAD: Gemignani (2009) uses definitions of *study abroad* and other related terms as presented by Peterson, Engle, Kenney, Kreutzer, Nolting, & Ogden (2007) to be universalized for the purpose of outcomes projects. I include some of Peterson, et al.’s definitions, but also bring in other researchers where more depth or explanation is needed. Peterson, et al. define study abroad as “Education abroad that results in progress toward an academic degree at a student’s home institution” (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 176). McKeown provides a definition from the strictly American perspective, calling study abroad “an academic experience, whether short term (as short as 1 week) or longer (up to a full academic year), during which students physically leave

the United States to engage in college study, cultural interaction, and more in the host country” (2009, p. 11).

There are some study abroad programs for high school students and for postgraduate students, but this study will be referring solely to higher education study abroad programs in an undergraduate context. Some undergraduate education abroad programs are not for academic credit, which I will not consider as *study abroad*, since the academic basis of non-credit programs is inconsistent. Lewin (2009) offers a helpful breakdown of applicable terms in this topic area, which I include for clarification:

Over the past decade, professionals in the field have questioned the term *study abroad* as the most felicitous description. Many have opted to replace it with *education abroad* on grounds that the latter term better captures the holistic nature of the experience that undergraduates undergo. Some prefer *international education*, and today we hear more frequent references to *global studies* and *global education*. No doubt, each of these terms has its strengths, and we could spend hours going back and forth as to which is best (p. xviii).

Study abroad, in this study, refers to any overseas programs that students attend at some point during their undergraduate career, while enrolled at a U.S. institution, and during which students earn academic credit toward their degrees at that same U.S. institution. All participants in this study were enrolled in a study abroad program during the time the submitted blog was written. When other terms, such as *education abroad*, are used, they refer to the larger context of international education, which encompasses for-credit programs, non-credit programs, and AACU’s concept of global learning, the idea that

preparation to fill large civic duties is achieved through some type of overseas experience (Peterson, et al., 2007; AACU, n.d.).

STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM: For the purposes of this study, a *study abroad program* refers to the specific host university, area of study, and courses that an individual student has selected. Some students will enroll directly at a foreign university, some will participate in university-sponsored reciprocal exchange, and others will use a third-party provider to facilitate their enrollment at a foreign institution or take university-level courses abroad as part of a “study center” model. The various types of programs will be distinguished when necessary.

STUDY ABROAD RETURNEE: A *study abroad returnee* is a student or graduate who has previously attended a study abroad program.

HOST COUNTRY/UNIVERSITY: A *host country* or *host university* will be used to describe the country or non-US university in which the student is studying.

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE: *International experience* is defined by Peterson et al. (2007) as the “broad, sweeping term for any opportunity undertaken by a US student that occurs outside the United States...it should not be used interchangeably with education abroad or study abroad” (qtd. in Gemignani, 2009, p. 12).

LEARNING OUTCOMES: *Learning outcomes*, specifically those used for study abroad, can be explained as

- 1) The knowledge, skills, and abilities an individual student possesses and can demonstrate upon completion of a learning experience or sequence of learning experiences (e.g. course, degree, education abroad program). In the education abroad context, learning outcomes may include language acquisition, cross-

cultural competence, discipline-specific knowledge, research skills, etc. 2)

Advance statements about what students ought to understand or be able to do as a result of a learning experience (qtd. in Gemignani, 2009, p. 12).

The USC Study Abroad Learning Outcomes (Appendix A) is the framework of learning used throughout this study, and provides an excellent example of a clear and descriptive set of learning outcomes for study abroad.

BLOG: A *blog*, derived from the term *weblog*, is a personal webpage typically used as a platform for linkage, opinion, narration, or information sharing (Barlow, 2008; Blood, 2000; Myers, 2010; Paulus, et al., 2009; Rosenberg, 2009). Halic, O., Lee, D., Paulus, T., & Spence, M. (2010) describe a blog as a “text-based online environment which allows for embedding links to other online resources, and in which the author’s posts appear in reverse chronological order” (p. 206). This ordering implies that the newest object is the most important; however, blogs also serve as their own archives, so that previous posts going back to the start of the webpage can be found and read. Paulus, et. al (2009) considers blogs to be

the most recent iteration of personal web pages. These are characterized by frequent updates, which are displayed with most recent posts at the top of the blog page...Personal journals are the most common genre of blogs (p. 3).

BLOG POST: A *blog post* refers to each individual and dated entry that the blog writer creates. Posts may contain text, links, videos, photos, or other forms of media.

BLOGGER: The *blogger* is the creator and author of the blog itself, sometimes referred to in this study as *student*.

BLOGOSPHERE: Hundreds of millions of blogs make up what is cleverly known as the *blogosphere*. As is the case with most terms in this topic area, the creator of this term is in question, but it has come to mean “the entire global conversation space” that had emerged with the popularity of blogging (Rosenberg, 2009, p. 205). As Rosenberg (2009) explains, there are many different spheres of the blogosphere, potentially separated into the political, the personal, the business, the scholarly, and so on. For the purposes of this study, blogosphere will refer to the general community of blogs and bloggers; within this community falls the subgenre that I will be examining: the study abroad blog.

Study Abroad: Known Effects

Although the ways in which a study abroad experience affects a student will vary greatly from individual to individual, there are a number of commonly known effects for which researchers have found evidence (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Dolby, 2004; Ellwood, 2011; Franklin, 2010; Gesinski, et al., 2010; Kitsantas, 2004; Kline, 1998; Kolb, 2009; Lee, 2011; Lewin, 2009; Martinsen et al., 2010; McKeown, 2009; Savicki, 2010; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Sutton & Rubin, 2004; Wolf, 2007). Second language acquisition during study abroad is a heavily researched area; researchers have found, not surprisingly, that a student’s ability to become competent in a second language is increased by studying in a country where the second language is spoken (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Martinsen, et al., 2010; Kline, 1998; Wanner, 2009; Wilkinson, 2000). One study found that this result occurred even when courses were taught in English and thus not during a total immersion experience (Wolf, 2007).

Other commonly researched effects include a change in identity and self-awareness (Dolby, 2004; Gesinski et al., 2010; Ellwood, 2011; Savicki & Cooley, 2011), multicultural competence (Ellwood, 2011; Franklin, 2010; Kitsantas, 2004; Kolb, 2009; Lee, 2011; Picard et al., 2009; Sutton & Rubin, 2004; Wolf, 2007), life enhancement (Fry, et al., 2009) and intellectual development (McKeown, 2009; Lee, 2011). Some combination of these effects creates another frequently researched outcome: professional or career applicability (Lewin, 2009; Franklin, 2010; Gesinski et al., 2010). NAFSA: Association of International Educators considers study abroad to be a “learning opportunity” which is,

uniquely capacitated to enable students to develop critical skills needed to compete in today’s global economy, including foreign language fluency, strong problem-solving and analytical capability, a tolerance for ambiguity, and cross-cultural competence...Study abroad contributes in vital ways to preparing students for the competitive global environment into which they will graduate... (NAFSA, 2013, par. 2).

These various effects may manifest themselves differently for each student, both in and out of the classroom, but current research is generally concerned with the larger implications of study abroad rather than with the individual result. Dr. Steven Trooboff, The President and CEO of the Council on International Educational Exchange, introduced the 2009 report titled “Study Abroad and its Transformative Power” and made these important points about study abroad:

All study abroad is not the same. There is a good deal more to the experience than just going abroad...Study abroad maximizes learning by taking participants

outside the familiar, ‘outside their own skin,’ and asks them to see and experience the world in new and different ways...Study abroad makes for a more informed, more tolerant, more patient citizenry, one that appreciates that you don’t have to be like ‘us’ to be OK...Study abroad offers each student a personal learning experience. Students return more confident in their ability to cope, more capable of dealing with uncertainty, and with a greater sense of purpose than before they left. It’s not only what they find out about the world and those around them that’s important. In the end, what might be most important is what they find out about themselves (Trooboff, 2010, p. viii-ix).

The development of students’ cross-cultural communication skills and multicultural competency are also of concern to researchers. Studies have shown that not only did students’ global competencies increase after study abroad participation, but students’ perceptions of this growth followed particular patterns (Gemignani, 2009; Kitsantas, 2004; Lee, 2011; Sutton & Rubin, 2004). Kitsantas (2004) found that cross-cultural competence increased based on students’ personal goals in this particular area, while Gemignani (2009) found that study abroad students perceived their cultural understanding to have come primarily from interaction with locals or other international students.

Perhaps most significant to this study is the research that has recognized the shifting and deepening identities of study abroad students (Dolby, 2004; Ellwood, 2011; Gesinski, et al., 2010; Savicki & Cooley, 2011). University of Alabama at Birmingham (Gesinski, et al., 2010) sought to understand the student perceptions of identity development during a short-term study abroad program. Through post-program

evaluations, researchers found that, when encouraged to pay attention to their individual multicultural and professional identity, the students were able to clearly define the ways in which these facets of their identity had shifted (Gesinski, et al., 2010). In terms of national identity, the research found that study abroad increased students' commitment to the exploration of national identity, and confirmed previous psychologists' claims that psychological well-being is related to American identity (Savicki & Cooley, 2011). A study conducted almost immediately following the events of September 11, 2001, claimed that, while study abroad students experienced "renewed nationalistic fervor in the United States," they also returned to their home country with an understanding of America as a "postnational formation that is grounded in multiplicity and openness" (Dolby, 2004, p. 152).

The September 11, 2001 attacks had an important influence on study abroad among US university students. A number of studies conducted after 9/11 refer to the direct effect the events had on both higher education in the United States as well as to education abroad (Kolb, 2009; Picard, et al., 2009; McKeown, 2009). Despite the "heightened security restrictions, family and student safety and security concerns, and the increased expense of studying abroad coupled with tight family finances," study abroad has continued to increase by the thousands every year since the attacks (Picard, et al., 2009, p. 321). International education professionals agree that this post-9/11 increase is due in part to both the US government's recognition of global citizenship as a national imperative, as well as the US public's support of the same idea (Kolb, 2009).

Evidenced by the research of the impact and the current state of study abroad, it is apparent that international education is a highly effective means for cultural

understanding, and thus a national imperative which contributes to national security, as Senator Durbin articulated in his speech to NAFSA (Durbin, 2011). As technological advances lead to the flattening of the world, to borrow from Friedman (2005), the internationalization of higher education curricula becomes increasingly more important. Research suggests that students who spend periods of their post-secondary education overseas are returning to the United States with a renewed sense of national identity, but also an increased awareness of multiculturalism and open-mindedness (Dolby, 2004; Ellwood, 2011; Franklin, 2010; Gesinski et al., 2010; Kolb, 2009; Lee, 2011; Picard et al., 2009; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Sutton & Rubin, 2004; Wolf, 2007).

The research on the effects of study abroad is extensive and continual. Many universities, including the University of South Carolina, yearly assess their study abroad programs by surveying students upon returning from their term abroad. The aforementioned studies follow a similar methods pattern, collecting data once a student has completed his or her study abroad program and returned to the United States. In both single-institutional and multi-institutional assessments of study abroad, students are asked to reflect or recall their experiences based on guiding questions. The responses and results that come from these post-study abroad studies are not only important, but also imperative to a continued belief in the importance of global education. However, due to their reliance on the students' recall of information, they cannot possibly capture the extensive student learning that occurs during a study abroad term.

Recent studies focus on students during their pre- and post-study abroad phases, but there is very little research done on students while they are in the crux of their overseas experience. Some of the aforementioned studies connected with students once

during their program, but none of the studies follow students throughout the duration of their programs. Instead, research is gathered when the students have returned, and they are asked to recount their experiences from memory—some of which may be quite distant. My study seeks to capture the student learning experience through blog posts about particular events, experiences, or situations within days of the occurrence. Unlike current research, I rely primarily on what the students choose to write about and share with the public, as opposed to only asking them to respond to directed questions.

The importance of filling in the gap of study abroad blogs in the literature is to determine what changes, developments, experiences, and attitudes students deem important to write about during a study abroad program, and if these writing choices show evidence of student learning, according to institutional learning outcomes. By using study abroad students' blogs as a basis for my study, I attempt to capture student learning as it is occurring, and thus incorporate a factor that is absent in current studies. Zilcosky (2008) makes a distinction between writing and story telling, insisting that telling “demanded... community...Whereas communal storytelling was part of the journey and enriched the plot, writing down narratives often implied the voyage's end” (p. 4). Investigating student narratives is important for this reason, because it is within these narratives that the core, or action, of the journey—instead of the memories of the voyage—can be found.

Student blogs written during a study abroad term may provide further insight into the known effects of study abroad. A student chooses what to write about in his or her online journal, as opposed to answering the purposeful questions found in a post-study abroad survey. Some students may also write about an experience that they have had

without cognizant recognition that they are, in fact, learning. These various stories, written and read by students, may reveal the process by which a second language is acquired, a change in identity occurs, multicultural competence is developed, and the intellect is challenged.

Blogging: Background & Recent Research

Before Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and FourSquare, there were weblogs. What came to be known as “blogs,” these online platforms for personal narratives, political opinions, link sharing, current event discussions, and virtually anything else, exploded in popularity among users of all ages. In order to better understand how and why these online self-publication websites became mainstream, it is helpful to understand from how and why blogs originated.

In 1994, the still early days of the World Wide Web, Justin Hall developed a personal webpage, “Justin’s Links from the Underground,” where he collected and shared the newest and most interesting website finds (Rosenberg, 2009). In a pre-Google world, such a resource proved valuable and popular. As Rosenberg notes, this popularity was due not only to the unusual and hard-to-find links but also to the “lively personality” and “never boring” writing that came to distinguish Hall’s web log of links from the others that came before, or even after, “the Underground” (Rosenberg, 2009, p. 22).

Most blog histories, many of them informal, cite the beginning of weblogs with Hall, whose site began in 1994 (Barlow, 2008; Blood, 2000; Cho, 2004; Rosenberg, 2009). The term “weblog” was coined by Jorn Barger on his blog in 1997, and shortened to “blog” in 1999 by Peter Merholz. By 2003, “weblog” was added to the Oxford English Dictionary. By 2004, “blog” was dubbed Merriam Webster’s word of the year (Cho,

2004, par. 4). Despite the vastness of the blogosphere and the scope of topic areas covered, the reason for this increase in popularity in the United States is not widely debated. In fact, it is most often pinpointed to the same historical event which marks an increase in US study abroad participation.

In just one commonality between the areas of research in study abroad and blogging, the tragic events of September 11, 2001 are often attributed to the sudden acceptance and usage of blogs in the twenty-first century (Barlow, 2009; Hourihan, 2002; McDaniel, 2005; Mooney, 2003; Rosenberg, 2009). Rosenberg (2009) describes, in detail, how New York journalist James Marino described the attacks on his blog as he watched from his office window. At 8:56 am, only minutes after submitting a post on the latest Broadway buzz, Marino posted the following:

Something very terrible just happened at the World Trade Center. I think a plane crashed into the north-western tower. It is horrible and stunning to look at. –james (qtd. in Rosenberg, 2009, p. 1).

Marino's post is likely the first web reference to the World Trade Center attacks, and it became the first of many blog posts written and published about September 11. The aforementioned Justin Hall was not far behind Marino, posting later that morning about the types of media that are valuable in such a crisis: email and TV, he said (Rosenberg, 2009).

Rosenberg (2009) continues to detail the ways in which the blogosphere exploded with references to the attacks, including a "page that automatically collated postings about the attacks from Blogger users across the Web and listed them in chronological order" (p. 4) created by Evan Williams, the director of what would later become Google's

Blogger, and Dave Winer who posted the answer to a *New York Times* reporter on his blog when he could not reach her by phone; Amy Harmon was, on the afternoon of 9/11, gathering information for a story on how the web was utilized during the attacks (Rosenberg, 2009). The internet, and blogs in particular, were suddenly a source for information—not just information, but accurate and up to date information. While the media was highly selective in what they shared with consumers, bloggers, it seemed, were less selective—or perhaps simply less censored. Rosenberg (2009) recalls that

At that moment of crisis, many of us looked to the Web for a sense of connection and a dose of truth...people felt the urgent necessity to express themselves and be heard as singular individuals. Those who posted felt the gravity of the moment and the certainty that stepping forward to record their thoughts had quantifiable but unmistakable value (p. 7).

Certainly, every blog post is not about a national tragedy. However, what is evident in the bloggers' reaction to 9/11 is the overwhelming sense of community that was created, virtually, across the country. Weinberger described this coming together as the world talking with itself, “doing what humans do when the innocent suffer: cry, comfort, inform, and most important, tell the story together” (qtd. in Rosenberg, 2009, p. 7). The community within the blogosphere is not only an important aspect of blogging, but is one of the features that distinguish it from other forms of writing entirely (Barlow, 2009; Halic, et al., 2010; McDaniel, 2005; Rosenberg, 2009). Zilcosky (2008) considers community to be the difference between story telling and story writing, which is perhaps the distinction between submitting a blog post and publishing a journal article. Within the blogosphere, there are writers, there are readers, and there are writers and readers. All

three participants make up the blog community, which is imaginatively divided up by interests, subject, topic, or intended audience (McDaniel, 2005; Rosenberg, 2009). This interaction between reader and writer, due to the uncensored nature of blogs and the ability to comment on posts, makes blogging particularly interesting to educators.

Higher education is beginning to recognize, utilize, and experiment with blogging and other forms of social media as admissions recruiting tools and pedagogical instruments both in and out of the classroom (Barnes & Lescault, 2011; Barnes & Matson, 2010; George & Dellasega, 2011; Sharma, 2010). Blogging has been found to be a successful way to better understand students' learning processes, their information retention, and the gaps in the knowledge based on Stahl's (2006) social theory of computer-supported collaborative learning, which suggests that knowledge is acquired or created through human interaction and conversation (Paulus, et al., 2009).

The body of empirical studies on blogging in educational contexts is limited but growing. Initial studies show that blogging can support reflective thinking, critical thinking, and collaboration, allowing students to take ownership of their learning (Bouldin, et al., 2006; Boulous, et al., 2006; Oravec, 2003). Research suggests that people tend to be more candid and reflective when using these tools (Joinsen, 2001; Shaw & Pieter, 2000).

When combined with stated learning outcomes and student/instructor interaction, blogging as a course requirement has the potential to be an effective tool for learning (Halic, et al., 2010). Additionally, students who blog develop ownership of their knowledge and creativity, and feel inspired to use their individual voices (Martinez, 2012). Blogging also enables academic or personal reflection, enables students to "see

changes and growth in thinking, which in turn allowed them to better reflect on their learning” (Sharma, 2010, p. 136). Sharma (2010) claims that blogs

offer a convenient mechanism for students to journal their learning processes, and if used appropriately this technology has the potential to facilitate reflection and learning. Most importantly, Weblogs support students in recording and revisiting experience, which is an important aspect of reflective learning (Boud et al., 1985). Weblogs can allow students to view the progress of their thinking over time (Ellison & Wu, 2008)...(p.129)

However, her study of a comparison between two groups of student bloggers—one that writes freely and independently and another that is given guidelines and support throughout the writing process—finds that the latter group of bloggers more commonly utilized reflection during the blogging experience. Sharma’s (2010) study may also suggest that a required blog, or a blog being written for academic credit, has its certain limitations, one of which would be the intended audience of professor. Making a blog voluntary versus compulsory could reveal different results in terms of effectiveness, since a student would be choosing whether or not to write about a particular experience in a voluntary situation.

Other studies on blogging in higher education have focused on foreign language learning and the role that blogging can play in this process. Ducate & Lomicka (2008) guided foreign language students in a year-long study in which students spent a semester reading blogs written by native speakers of the studied foreign language (French or German), and then a semester writing their own blog in the foreign language. Results indicated that not only did students enjoy the process of reading and writing over a two

semester period in order to practice language, but also developed a sense of community, both with their classmates and with native speakers who commented on the student blogs (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008).

There is a small, limited amount of research on travel blogs and travel bloggers, but these studies examine tourists, rather than the study abroad student (Azariah, 2011; Banyai & Glover, 2011; Pudliner, 2007; Wenger, 2008). Pudliner (2007) uses canonical literature and literary figure's journals to set a precedent of travel writing. Arguing that this genre emerged long ago, she uses the characteristics of literature to reveal the worth of travel blogs. Specifically, she discusses the blog of Canadian Carol Watson, who travels around the United States and shares her adventures with the blogosphere. Pudliner (2007) finds her writing to be

...characteristic of weblogs; short and concise commentaries to entice future exploration. But her pictures capture more information for the reader to disseminate, adding depth, texture and structure to what she is writing about. She describes and depicts an intimacy with the landscape visited at a certain moment in time. Her comment implies the 'moment', suggesting that future visitors may not be able to capture that particular unique display of the landscape (51).

Other researchers on this topic have argued for similar claims, that the blogging of travelers reveals much about the tourist experience, and can be used to encourage the traveling of others (Azariah, 2011; Banyai & Glover, 2011; Wenger, 2008). And yet, these studies are absent of examinations of the study abroad student blog, which, unlike the tourist blog, could be rich with evidence of learning and meaning-making from the student perspective.

Study Abroad Blogging

Despite the expanding numbers of study abroad participants and the growing population of the blogosphere, little research on the study abroad blog exists. Lee (2011) studies the pedagogical uses of a blog for language learning during study abroad, but the bloggers in her sample respond to prompts and assignments. Before the days of blogging, Taylor (1991) provides a guide to professors on how to use the student travel journal as a means for assessment of study abroad learning; however, like Lee's study, Taylor suggests a guided, regulated approach, rather than simply allowing the students to write organically.

With extensive research done on the educational and personal benefits of study abroad, and with a growing body of research on the pedagogical possibilities for student blogging, a study that seeks to understand the relationship between these two twenty-first century trends is both logical and necessary. If students are learning, growing, and developing during study abroad programs—and indeed they are—and if these same students are documenting their experiences in a public and social arena, then perhaps the process of this learning can be better understood. The more students who study abroad and the more students who document these experiences on a blog, the wider the gap in the literature becomes. This study is merely the beginning of what should become a large and fascinating area of research that will certainly evolve with an increase in national support for study abroad and an ever-changing technology landscape.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of Study

This study looked for evidence of student learning using travel blogs from undergraduate students at the University of South Carolina (USC). I chose to research this particular population because I have extensive knowledge of the USC study abroad processes and programs; furthermore, their publicly available learning outcomes showcase the commitment to student learning and development as it occurs during study abroad. I read, coded, and analyzed blogs from the Spring of 2011 through the Fall of 2012. To eliminate extraneous variables, only student bloggers from the University of South Carolina were studied. Through careful readings of the sample blogs, I drew conclusions about the following questions:

1. What do study abroad participants choose to write about in their blogs while they are studying abroad?
2. Do these various stories document the known effects of study abroad, and if so, how?
3. How is student learning—cultural, personal, and academic—evident in the study abroad blog, if at all?

The framework of my study was based on the known effects of study abroad, as described in Chapter II, and the USC Study Abroad Learning Outcomes (Appendix A). Research question number two was answered through a comparison between the known effects and the data results. Research question number three was answered by juxtaposing

the instances of learning, as defined by Kolb (1984), to USC's Study Abroad Learning Outcomes. Kolb's (1984) Theory of Experiential Learning, which considers the learning process to be only possible through experience, was used to define and articulate the types of learning I looked for in the study abroad blogs.

I submitted my research proposal to the USC Institutional Review Board for approval. Approval for exemption status was granted (Appendix B).

Data Selection

Blogs for the study were selected one of two ways: through voluntary submission and through intentional selection. The following criteria was considered for both those submitted voluntarily and those selected from the USC Study Abroad Office blog archives:

1. Substance: that a blog have no fewer than 10 posts
2. Term abroad: the student must have blogged for one semester between Spring 2011 and Fall 2012
3. Location: that there be no more than two bloggers studying in the same country
4. Type of student: must have been a traditionally-aged undergraduate in any major during the study abroad program for which the blog was written

The criteria served to diversify the sample as much as possible within the confines of specific variables. Blogs needed to have at least 10 posts with text in order to be considered substantial and valuable to the study. The type of student and term abroad narrowed the sample and limited the possibility of unwanted extraneous variables. Since all students used in the study were undergraduates who spent a semester abroad, a more accurate comparison was possible. Since the type of student and the time spent abroad

was the same for all sample blogs, a variance in location was used to strengthen the external validity of the study. Although five of the voluntarily submitted bloggers studied in Spain, only two were used in the sample. One blog was eliminated because it contained too few posts; of the remaining four that met the sample criteria, Tom's and Yvonne's blogs were chosen based on the order that the blogs were submitted.

Students who went abroad during Spring of 2011, Fall of 2011, Spring of 2012, or Fall of 2012 received an email sent from the USC Study Abroad Office inviting them to submit their blogs for this research study (Appendix C). This email informed them of the study, and invited them to voluntarily participate; the number of participants was limited to 10, but only seven of the 22 submitted blogs met the prescribed criteria. Students who volunteered and met the initial criteria were sent a personal follow-up email with further details of the research project and instructions on the information I needed from them (Appendix D). Not all students who were sent the follow-up email were included in the research; some students who initially expressed interest never sent me the URL to their blog, some students had too few posts (fewer than 10), and some were eliminated as part of the location criteria, which was included in order to diversify the sample and increase external validity.

Blogs which met the prescribed criteria and were publicly available on USC's study abroad website were selected from the blog archive as part of the intentional selection sample. These students had previously volunteered to be an "official blogger" for the USC Study Abroad office. Although this role was entirely voluntary, they were asked to write weekly posts, cover appropriate topics, and consider the USC student body as their primary audience. The target sample was 10, but only four met the above criteria.

Gender and ethnicity were not considered in the selection of the sample. However, 27.3 % of the sample was male and 72.7% were female. This percentage breakdown closely reflects the gender demographics in study abroad, since according to the Open Doors Report 2012, 35.6 % of study abroad participants in 2010-2011 were male, and 64.4% were female (IIE, 2012). The information about individual bloggers used and presented in this study is solely the information that was available in the student blog. With the exception of student name, term abroad, and blog URL, all other information was found through the analysis of the respective blogs. I did not solicit students for gender or ethnic information. The study abroad location, although my criteria eliminated from the sample more than two bloggers in the same host country, was not considered in initial sample selection or in the blog analysis. In selecting my sample, I was not looking for bloggers in specific locations, but merely for a diverse range. My sample of 11 bloggers covered nine countries (with England and Wales counted as one country, under the United Kingdom); every country represented in this sample fell into the top 25 study abroad destinations for US students, according to the Open Doors Report 2012 (IIE, 2012).

The USC Blogger

Every semester, including summer, the USC Study Abroad Office features blogs under the “Student Blogs” section of the website. All past blogs are archived, and although the student bloggers and their profiles are visible as far back as 2008, only the 2011-2012 blogs can be read by the general public. It is from these archives, located at www.studyabroad.sc.edu, that I selected my sample blogs. Though the students featured on USC’s blog page did not volunteer for research as did the independent bloggers

included in this study did, the USC bloggers did volunteer prior to their study abroad program to be a featured blogger on the Study Abroad Office.

Prior to the Fall of 2012, students were contacted on the Study Abroad Listserv (a large email distribution list to which students who apply to study abroad are automatically added) and given brief details on the USC Study Abroad blogger program. Students who studied abroad in the Fall of 2012 were contacted more directly, using the USC study abroad database to send this interest email only to upcoming study abroad students. In this initial solicitation email (Appendix E), students are asked to contact the office and provide the following information: study abroad program, personal interest in blogging, and any past experience with blogging. The Study Abroad Office uses this information to informally—that is, without a formal or official criteria—select approximately five featured bloggers for the semester.

Bloggers for the semester are selected only after looking holistically at all those who volunteered. The Study Abroad Office seeks to consider gender, ethnicity, location, and program type in the selection process, with a final goal of diversity and originality. Males, many majors (such as engineering, education), minority populations, and locations (such as Latin America) are underrepresented in study abroad programs at USC. By selecting bloggers who fall into some of these categories, USC hopes to increase participation from these various demographics. Those students who exhibit prior experience with blogging are also given priority, although most students who volunteer have not previously blogged.

Once the bloggers have been selected, they are sent a follow-up email with further instructions on their commitment (Appendix F). Students are asked to submit a photo and

answer questions for a profile, so that readers can learn more about the bloggers. In addition, these bloggers also sign a contract agreeing to blog once to twice a week (as their schedule allows), include only appropriate content, be creative with photos and videos, and write a reflection post at the end of their respective program (Appendix G). The Study Abroad Office does not have a way to enforce the requests to blog frequently, so the contract serves more as a potential motivating factor; however, a student's blog will be removed from the USC website if inappropriate content is posted. About halfway through the semester of their study abroad term, the students in this study were sent a email of encouragement, reminding them that students, teachers, parents, and others were reading their blogs and to keep posting updates. Apart from this halfway-point email, students were not prompted or reminded to post. About half of the students from each term do not fully participate, a problem that made many blogs ineligible for this study, based on my sample criteria.

At the end of the semester, students are sent a final email thanking them for their participation, inviting them to come by the office for a small gift, and reminding them to post a reflection entry, if they have not already done so.

Data Collection

After blogs were volunteered, selected, and narrowed based on sample criteria, I had 11 total blogs to code and include in this study. The following information was entered into a spreadsheet for tracking purposes: first name, last name, pseudonym, term abroad, program type, host country, host city, email, USC or independent blogger, blog title, and blog URL. For student privacy, only the pseudonym, host country, and USC or

independent blogger information will be included in this report. A second sheet in this spreadsheet file was created to track data. Table 3.1 shows details of the final sample.

TABLE 3.1 Detailed Description of Sample

#	Pseudonym	Location	Program Type	$\frac{\# \text{ of Words}}{\# \text{ of Posts}}$	Blogger Type
1	Alice	Netherlands	Exchange	$\frac{\sim 7,500}{28}$	USC
2	Ashley	England	Exchange	$\frac{\sim 20,000}{18}$	Independent
3	Ellen	Australia	Partner	$\frac{\sim 5,500}{34}$	Independent
4	Henry	Japan	Exchange	$\frac{\sim 2,500}{10}$	Independent
5	Kevin	Czech Rep.	Partner	$\frac{\sim 13,500}{22}$	Independent
6	Lynne	Wales	Exchange	$\frac{\sim 28,000}{24}$	USC
7	Nancy	China	Partner	$\frac{\sim 28,500}{27}$	USC
8	Natalie	New Zealand	Partner	$\frac{\sim 16,000}{16}$	Independent
9	Nicole	Italy	Partner	$\frac{\sim 11,000}{24}$	USC
10	Tom	Spain	Partner	$\frac{\sim 18,000}{20}$	Independent
11	Yvonne	Spain	Partner	$\frac{\sim 9,000}{23}$	Independent

Each blog was copied from its internet host and put into an individual Microsoft Word document. Posts were read in consecutive order, from earliest post to the most recent—through the end of the respective study abroad program, including the return to the US. I read and coded each blog once through, allowing themes and patterns to organically emerge and then compiling these themes into a spreadsheet database. For consistency and accuracy, I then read and coded each blog again. Blogs were read from the computer and coded using the “Review” feature in Microsoft Word. Highlights over post segments and annotations denoting the particular theme or themes that these

segments reflected were used to track the coding data. After two close readings of each blog, nine major and consistent themes in regards to student learning during study abroad emerged: culture, food, language, travel, people, academics, transportation, reflection, and acknowledgement of learning. These themes are further defined in Chapter IV. Additional subcategories found sporadically in some of the blogs included getting involved, accommodation, politics, and budgeting.

The nine major themes of learning were added to a spreadsheet, and every instance of these themes in each blog was counted and added to the data set. An “instance” or “reference,” as it will be called throughout the study, refers to one single, uninterrupted phrase about the theme. For example, if a student wrote an entire post that is focused only on food, as Yvonne did, then that is one reference to food. If a student wrote a post about a trip and described multiple forms of transportation in separate paragraphs, each of those were counted as separate references to transportation. The page numbers on which these instances occur were also included in this table. Instances were found by counting the respective annotations in each blog document. Collecting data by tracking information in a Word document and compiling the results in an Excel spreadsheet leaves room for error, but the error margin was decreased by reading each blog twice and by carefully reviewing the results.

Posts were read from the earliest post with reference to study abroad to the final concluding post—either the final post in the blog, or the final post with reference to the same study abroad program. Most of the blogs used in this sample were created for the sole purpose of documenting the student’s study abroad journey and did not include posts that referenced irrelevant experiences before or after the study abroad program. Some

students began writing posts in their blog before they had left for the study abroad semester; these posts were included in the data if they were relevant to the students' study abroad experience. All but two of the students stopped updating their blogs within a month of returning to the US, most of them writing a post that described their return home and the end of their program. The two students who continued to update their blogs were studying abroad for an academic year. Nancy, in China, had applied upfront to go abroad for the entire academic year, but Natalie, in New Zealand, decided in October of her Fall semester abroad to extend her program for the full year. For both of these students, posts were only read through the end of the first semester to remain consistent with the sample.

Since not every word of every blog post was deemed relevant to this study, I looked specifically for instances of learning, comparison, reflection, and cultural awareness as they occurred in any capacity. These four categories are loosely based around Kolb's (1986) Cycle of Learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Each learning category does not necessarily correspond to a stage in the Cycle of Learning, but are based on Kolb's (1984) belief in experience as essential to the learning process. Since students rarely labeled instances in these specific learning categories, I pulled them out based on the context, the diction, and the ways in which students chose to refer to the experience or moment. For example, Yvonne, in Spain, writes that, "after checking into our hotel on Sunday I went to lunch..." (p. 2). This reference to food and eating is lacking in substance when compared to her post on page 9, titled "Food Part 1 of 4: Breakfast," in which she reveals that "the majority of Spanish dishes that I've tried so far have been

delicious” and “food in Spain is of course different than in the US, but there are also differences in the times and ways in which people eat their meals.” I made informed decisions about which instances to include in my data, based on the ways in which learning was involved, implied, or acknowledged.

After the data were collected and compiled, I compared the nine major themes to the USC Study Abroad Learning Outcomes (Appendix A). Each theme was able to fit into or correspond with one of the USC Study Abroad Learning Outcomes overarching categories: academic, cultural, and personal. Data were also compared to the known effects of study abroad, as described in Chapter II. These two frameworks allowed me to effectively answer the research questions and come to concise conclusions about the ways in which students write about learning during a study abroad program.

Data Presentation

In my discussion of these student blogs, I use pseudonyms to refer to the students and reveal only their host country, not city. In reproducing pieces of blogs in this study, I have done my best to maintain the presence of the original blogger by altering only what is necessary based on the topic being discussed. Quotes from the blogs are copied verbatim, or proper indication is given when items are changed or omitted. In order to further protect the identity of the students and those who may be subjects in their blogs, I have omitted any names of people or names of private companies that the bloggers use in their posts.

Limitations

Because I used a convenience sample of only USC students in my study, the external validity of the results is limited. However, only four of the 11 bloggers

participated in USC exchange programs; the additional eight studied abroad with third party providers, companies that are partnered with universities all over the US. This fact, coupled with the diversity of study abroad host location of the sample, increases otherwise limited external validity, since students outside of the USC system can participate in the same programs used by eight of the sample bloggers.

As previously explained, I did not consider gender or ethnicity in my sample selection; however, large gaps in study abroad participation within these two demographic areas are a concern for researchers and international educators. Information about individual bloggers that has been provided or used in this study is only that which could be garnered from a close reading of each sample blog. As such, a blogger's gender or ethnicity was unknown to me, the researcher, unless the blogger self reported this data in his or her blog. Students used in the sample were not asked to solicit gender or ethnic information so as to preserve the organic nature of this study. As both reader and researcher, I sought to only read and analyze the sample blogs through the material they provided in their blog writings. This study, then, does not allow for a comparison between the differing ways that various genders and ethnicities process learning on a blog during a study abroad program.

The study abroad locations of the sample bloggers each fall into the top 25 destinations of the 2012 Open Doors Report (IIE, 2012). Most of the host locations are considered traditional—that is, according to NAFSA, Australia/New Zealand or Western Europe—but three of the 11 bloggers studied in non-traditional locations: Japan, China, and the Czech Republic (NAFSA, 2013). Furthermore, mainland China is the only location among the sample bloggers' host countries that is considered undeveloped. Since

my sample was primarily in traditional, developed locations, I was unable to draw conclusions about the possible role of blogging for students studying abroad in non-traditional or undeveloped countries.

The number of bloggers used in this study was a limitation on both ends of the spectrum. Eleven blogs is a relatively small sample size to effectively understand how students write about a study abroad experience on an online journal. My target sample size was 20, but as previously explained, only 11 blogs met the sample criteria. Although a great deal of information about how study abroad students use blogs emerged from this sample, the study would have been more revealing with a larger sample size. On the other hand, the sheer amount of data collected in just 11 blogs could not possibly be fully explained or reproduced in this report. A case study of one or two blogs, to understand the process of student learning during a language intensive program, perhaps, would allow for a closer and more in-depth analysis of the learning process during study abroad.

The possibility of differences in results between USC bloggers and independent bloggers was a limitation that I accounted for by distinguishing between the two types of bloggers in the study. So as not to skew the data, students were further identified by the type of blogger that they are (independent or USC), which allowed for an additional dimension of data that was unexpected: a comparison between the learning that university-promoted bloggers write about and the learning that independent bloggers write about during a study abroad experience. Although this was not the focus of my study, this additional data did emerge and the results will be included in Chapter IV.

This study was an in-depth analysis of the written posts that students posted during their study abroad semester. Although all bloggers included photos and some

included videos, this study did not analyze these aspects of the blog. In fact, posts that only contained photos or videos and had no text were not considered in the number of posts for the sample criteria. A detailed and visual analysis of both students' photographs and self-made videos was not possible for this study, but would be a fascinating area for future research.

The motivation of the sample bloggers was not considered in the compiling and analysis of data. Motivation in this study refers to a blogger's intended purpose for writing the blog as well as the intended, perceived, or expected audience. USC bloggers' motivations likely differed slightly from those of the independent bloggers in the sample; perhaps USC bloggers were motivated to write by the contract they signed or saw their role as one of influencing peers to study abroad, while independent bloggers may have been primarily motivated by a desire to keep in touch with family or friends in the US. Independent bloggers' motivations are unknown, and depend upon a large amount of factors, including but not limited to family and friends, previous blogging experience, and personal benefits. Understanding how a blogger's motivation influences the writing decisions that he or she makes is an interesting area for further research.

All students used in the study were enrolled in a semester long study abroad program. Therefore, this study did not allow for a comparison between the ways students use blogs during different types of education abroad programs—that is, short-term, volunteer, research, or other program varieties. Semester-long participants were chosen for the sample to better understand student growth and change during a study abroad program over time. While comparisons to student blog use during various education

abroad programs would be useful, this data was not considered relevant to my research questions.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

To my left was the Bristol Channel, blending inkily [sic] into the sky before it softened into a navy over our heads, brightened on the right by smoky yellow streetlights. I have never seen so many stars in my life. To my slight surprise the constellations were in a different place - that is, until I remembered my astronomy. –Lynne

Although a great deal is already known about the student learning that occurs during study abroad programs, this study revealed fascinating details about how students process this learning while they are actually abroad, or the ways in which they do not appear to process this learning through writing. My findings were consistent with the known effects of study abroad, but show the surprising and unique ways in which students achieve in these areas of development. My research questions were focused on understanding the process that students go through in order to arrive at these known effects, and what topics they chose to write about in regards to their experiences. The research questions for this study were:

1. What are students choosing to write about in their blogs while they are abroad?
2. Do these various stories document the known effects of study abroad, and if so, how?
3. How is student learning—cultural, personal, and academic—evident in the study abroad blog, if at all?

Through the publicly available blogs of 11 University of South Carolina study abroad students, I discovered patterns in what students tended to write about, what they seemed to leave out, and the variety of ways in which these students explained their

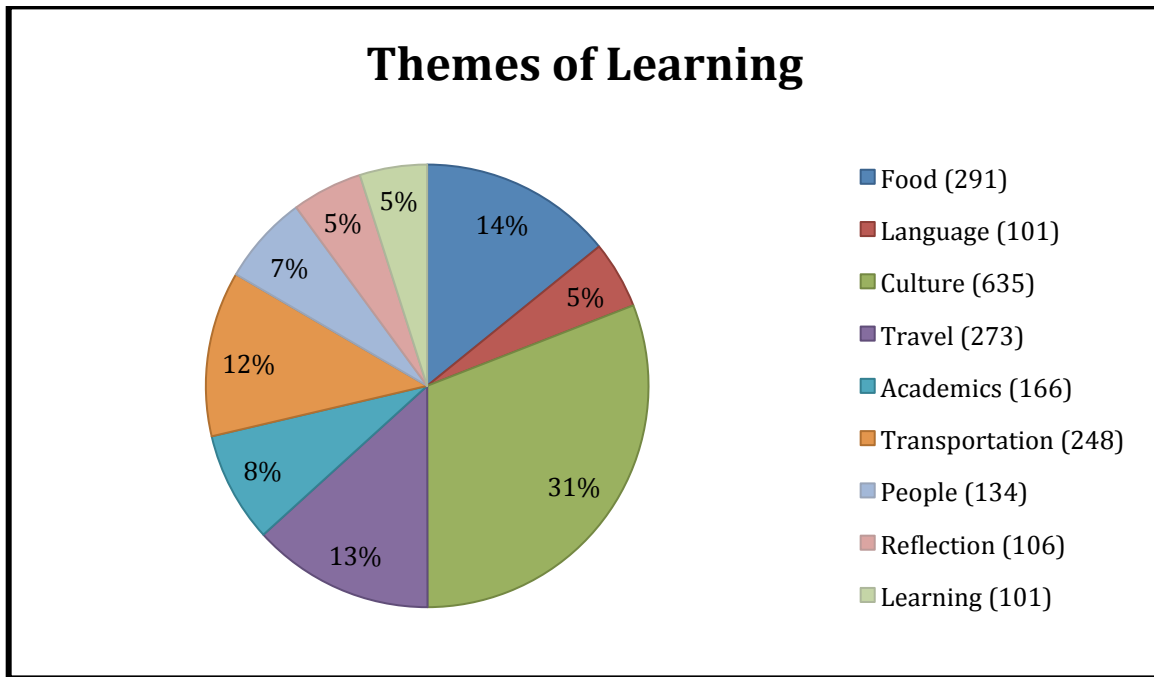
experiences. Some students' blogs were heavily descriptive, with most of the posts giving step-by-step details of the days, travels, and cultural experiences. Others, though, were primarily reflective; these introspective writers used the blog space to intellectually describe experiences, sometimes lacking any description at all and relying heavily on the thoughts they had during the event or occurrence.

After two close readings of each blog, nine themes of learning emerged repeatedly in the students' posts. These categories that developed are based on the topics that students chose to write about and correlate with learning, as defined by Kolb (1984, 1985). It is important to note that, consistent with Kolb's (1984) definition, student learning can occur solely within the concrete experience and without an awareness that learning is occurring. Therefore, I included in my themes the significant concrete experiences that students chose to write about. An experience's significance was determined by the student's choice to write about it, a choice which implies that this concrete experience impacted the student in some way. For example, Natalie, who studied abroad in New Zealand, frequently wrote about "hitching," or hitch hiking, as a primary means of transportation. Natalie's choice to write "we had to hitch back to our car, and got really lucky with the woman who picked us up" suggests that this experience of hitch hiking was somehow important, challenging, new or different.

The nine themes that surfaced, then, were a result of the choices the bloggers made—the experiences about which they chose to write. These themes were (in order of frequency): culture, food, travel, transportation, language, academics, people, reflection, learning. Figure 1.1 provides a percentage breakdown of the total occurrence of these themes in all 11 blogs as well as, in parentheses, the total number of occurrences for each

theme. Culture as the most popular theme may be misleading, since nearly all of themes could contain aspects of cultural references. I chose to separate culture into its own category because students often wrote about it outside of these other areas. Food, travel, transportation, language, academics, and people were only included in the percentage of cultural references if they were outright described as a cultural difference or observation.

FIGURE 4.1



Although two different kinds of bloggers were used in this study, the independent blogger and the USC blogger, a clear pattern did not emerge that starkly distinguished them. USC bloggers were the only students to write a reflective post at the end of the study abroad term; however, Henry, an independent blogger, was the most reflective, with 31% of his posts (as divided by themes) being introspective or metaphorical. The next highest in the reflective category was Nancy, a USC blogger, with 9%. In comparison to the other themes, 5% of all the bloggers' references were reflective. References to differences in culture or cultural observations were, at 30%, the most

common theme. 37% of independent blogger Tom's references were cultural, but Ashley, USC blogger, had the largest frequency of culture with 46%.

Despite similar choices being made by each student about what to write about on a blog during a study abroad semester, each blogger was unique and the blogs altogether different from each other. In order to recognize the individuality of these student experiences and the various ways in which they processed learning on their blogs, I have included brief profiles of each blog. These profiles will provide a larger context for the results—results which, though grouped in a meaningful way, are also qualitative and thus vary slightly from blogger to blogger. The experiences of these 11 students—through meeting new people, traveling independently, trying new activities or foods, and immersing themselves in unknown cultures—are so rich and complex that to narrow them down to merely the common themes of learning that consistently emerged would be to leave out the most important component of this study: the student.

Blog Profiles

Although this study is interested in the commonalities across 11 study abroad blogs, the individuality of presentation and the uniqueness with which each blogger

TABLE 4.1 Detailed Description of Sample

#	Pseudonym	Location	Program Type	$\frac{\# \text{ of Words}}{\# \text{ of Posts}}$	Blogger Type
1	Alice	Netherlands	Exchange	$\frac{\sim 7,500}{28}$	USC
2	Ashley	England	Exchange	$\frac{\sim 20,000}{18}$	Independent
3	Ellen	Australia	Partner	$\frac{\sim 5,500}{34}$	Independent
4	Henry	Japan	Exchange	$\frac{\sim 2,500}{10}$	Independent
5	Kevin	Czech Rep.	Partner	$\frac{\sim 13,500}{22}$	Independent

6	Lynne	Wales	Exchange	$\sim \frac{28,000}{24}$	USC
7	Nancy	China	Partner	$\sim \frac{28,500}{27}$	USC
8	Natalie	New Zealand	Partner	$\sim \frac{16,000}{16}$	Independent
9	Nicole	Italy	Partner	$\sim \frac{11,000}{24}$	USC
10	Tom	Spain	Partner	$\sim \frac{18,000}{20}$	Independent
11	Yvonne	Spain	Partner	$\sim \frac{9,000}{23}$	Independent

describes his or her experience is explained through a profile of each blog. In Table 4.1, a snapshot of all the bloggers is provided for quick reference and to create a full picture of the sample used in this study. All students studied abroad for a minimum of one semester and blogged during the study abroad term. Only the host country of each student is provided, and not the city, in an effort to further protect the privacy of the bloggers. The program type is listed solely for reference, but was not considered in a comparative way. Exchange programs are typically a more immersive experience, with the students enrolled in an overseas institution and taking classes with degree seeking students at the university. Partner programs, companies that arrange the logistics of a study abroad term for each student, may be immersive like an exchange program or may involve the students taking courses with other study abroad students, and not enrolled at an overseas institution.

Both the program type and the number of words are given in order to provide a larger context to each blog. Henry's blog, with 10 posts and about 2,500 words, is the shortest; he is also the only blogger to not write at all about food, language, or academics. When considered within the context of the brevity of his total blog, there may be an explanation to his lack of discussion on those three topics. The Blogger Type refers to

whether students were featured USC bloggers at the time of writing, or if they were independent bloggers who volunteered for research. Distinguishing between the two types of bloggers may provide explanation for certain decisions that a blogger made, such as to post a reflection post at the end of the study abroad semester.

Alice

My morning routine of waking up, running/cycling, and showering concludes with a solid cup of coffee and the morning paper. Yes, the paper is in Dutch. And no, I can't read it to complete comprehension, however I've spent so many mornings with it I can get the gist of just about every article. –Alice

Alice was a USC blogger during her semester in the Netherlands. She takes primarily a photojournalism approach, sometimes only including a photo with a brief description in a single post. More often, her posts offer meaningful textual descriptions and reflections and provide photos for readers to visualize her experience. Unlike many of her peers, Alice offers glimpses into her daily life in the Netherlands, such as what can be found inside her refrigerator or a description of what she sees when she wanders around her host city. Her posts about her spontaneous cycling journeys reveal various aspects of the culture and her adventurous nature. She admits that “a decent percentage of my reason for living abroad is to take a break from the States,” and her willingness to embrace the culture around her is made apparent through her stories of exploration, culture shock, and language.

The majority of Alice’s references to learning can be found in the culture theme (46%), but at 18%, language also proves to be an important topic to her. Figure 4.2 shows the breakdown of the themes of learning as they appear in Alice’s blog. In addition to these major themes, Alice also makes multiple references to her accommodations, which she describes with fondness, and to keeping up with current events in the Netherlands.

Quite different from her peers, Alice spent very little time writing about travel beyond the host country, choosing instead to focus on her depiction of what life is really like in the Netherlands.

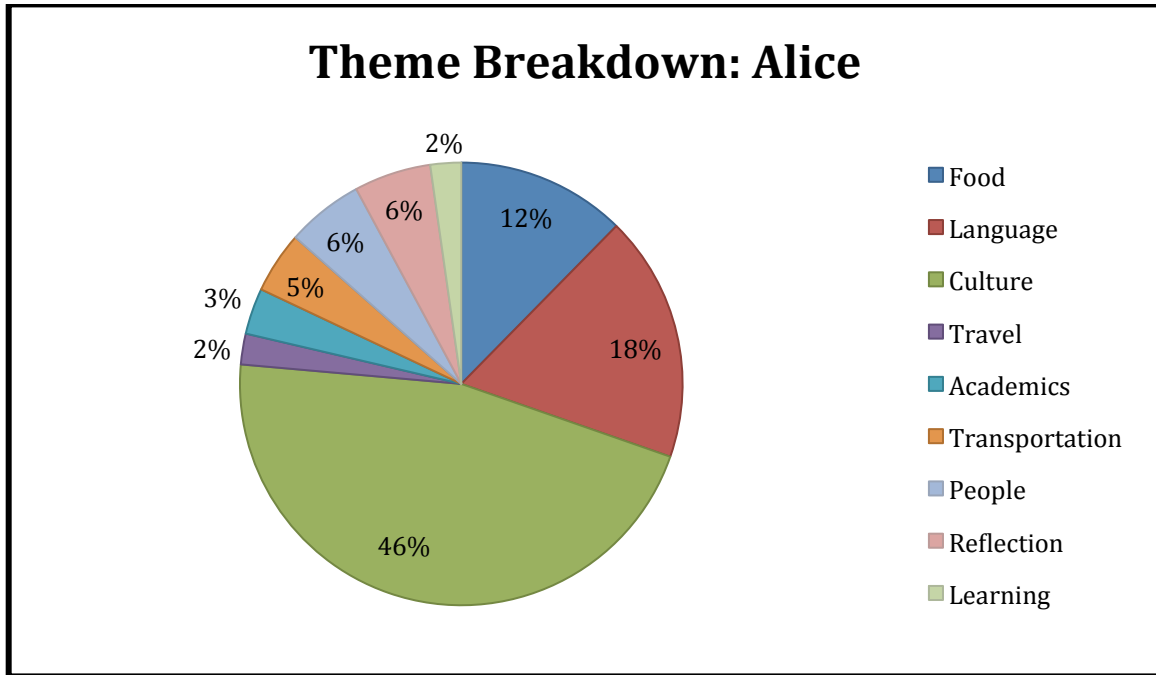


FIGURE 4.2

Ashley

...Seeing London and the rest of England has thoroughly convinced me that I was born in the wrong country. -Ashley

Ashley kept an independent blog while she studied abroad in England. Although she includes some photos, Ashley relies heavily on words to describe and recount her experiences. Her posts are primarily descriptive, with lengthy accounts of her ordinary days or travel adventures. She spends about the same amount of posts writing about her travels around or outside of her host country as she does her in-country experiences; however, the accounts of her travels tend to be much longer and more in depth than her descriptions of every life in England. Her tone throughout her blog is informal, and her love for all things English surfaces frequently. She identifies well with the people and the

culture, and exhibits learning through trying new food, traveling independently, and balancing a budget. Although very little of her time is spent reflecting, Ashley still makes sense of her experiences through detailed and descriptive posts.

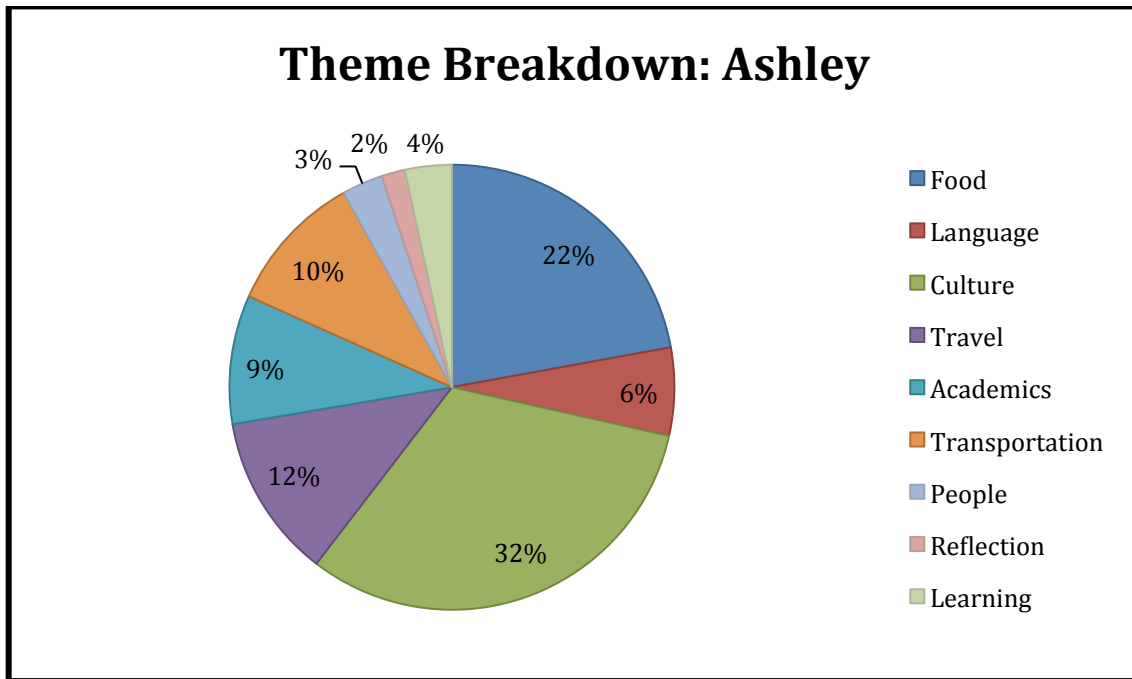


FIGURE 4.3

As apparent in Figure 4.3, 32% of Ashley’s references were cultural, but food was her second highest reference of learning at 22%. There is a close distribution between travel, transportation, language, and academics, all but the latter being interconnected between posts about travel outside of the host country. Despite being in England, Ashley still references language learning 6% of the time, which shows both her awareness of language differences in England as well as the communication issues she encounters while traveling to non-English speaking countries. In addition to these major themes, Ashley also makes frequent references to her “struggles with budgeting,” and learning to manage her time between course work and the urge to explore.

Ellen

I've been conquering a lot of Australian firsts- throwing a boomerang, drinking goon, trying kangaroo, and my personal favorite, being dumped in the middle of the ocean to snorkel the Great Barrier Reef. –Ellen

Ellen, an independent blogger, kept a lively and eccentric blog while studying abroad in Australia. Although relatively brief, her posts usually include unique cultural observations, humorous accounts of experiences, and the differences in academic life. She writes of her involvement with other Australian students and her professors, including an in-depth account of “Jaffy O-Week,” the equivalent to orientation with some cultural variance. Although a large portion of her references, travel accounts remain brief and straight to the point. She offsets many of her posts with slideshows and videos, which create a separate visual dimension of sharing that is not explored in this study. Ellen even shares some of her course work, including a photojournalism project and a documentary press release, showing that she is “actively engaged in the learning process” (Appendix A).

Although culture, at 26%, is her most frequent theme of learning, academics is close behind at 23% (Figure 4.4). Ellen had more references to academics than any of the other bloggers, due largely to her sharing of assignments and descriptions of field trips. Since the academic culture also falls under this category, Ellen’s references to orientation and campus life are also included in this percentage. Her exact major is unknown, but Ellen writes that she plans to join “the media and journalism club, since its [sic] about time to do something with that major of mine.” Apart from these major themes, Ellen writes about getting involved on campus and frequently references her accommodations,

including a “Floor Trip,” when all the students living on the same floor travel together for a weekend.

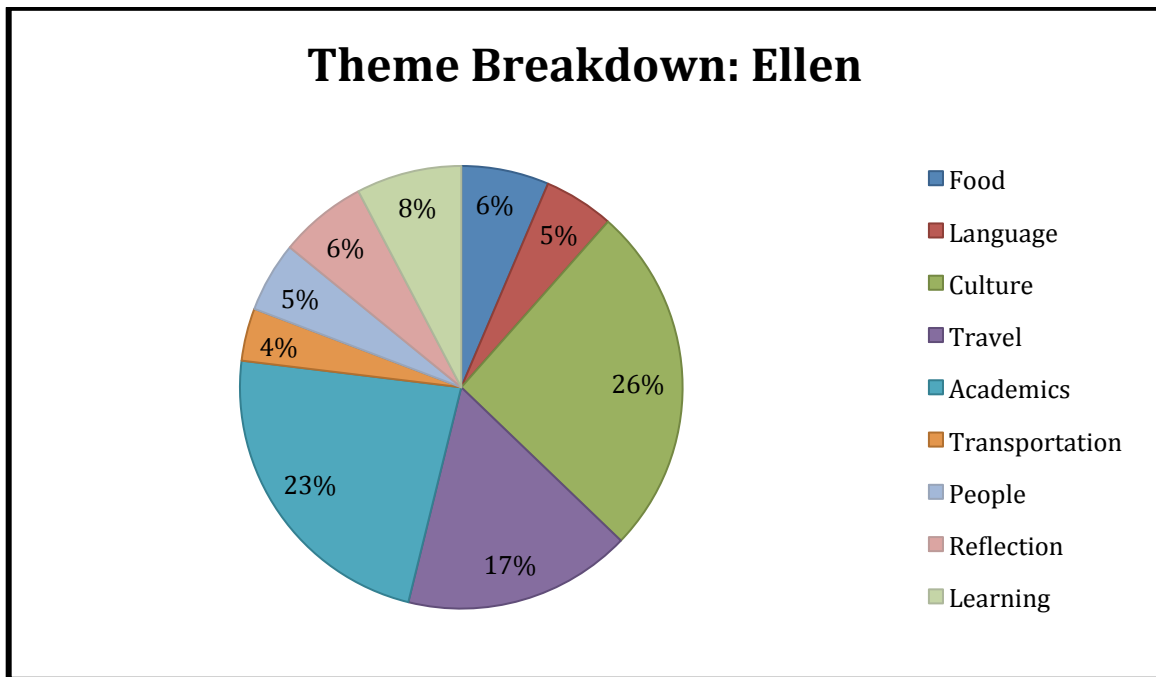


FIGURE 4.4

Henry

Traveling I am discovering is best done with a little bit of planning, a dash of boldness, and heaps of curiosity...Being able to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves, and maybe not really knowing what the results will be. You never really can know what interesting people you will meet or where they will take you. -Henry

Henry’s independent blog, as a whole, is different from all of the other blogs in this study. His posts from Japan are characterized by reflection, and his intended audience seems to be future study abroad students. He gives very little detail of experiences, choosing to instead describe the emotions or feelings attached to those experiences. His perspective on being a tall African American in Japan is unique, and he explains that he enjoys “feel[ing] like a super star.” Photos are included in each post, usually without explanation or description. Despite his lack of specificity, Henry touches on various learning experiences through his reflective and introspective posts.

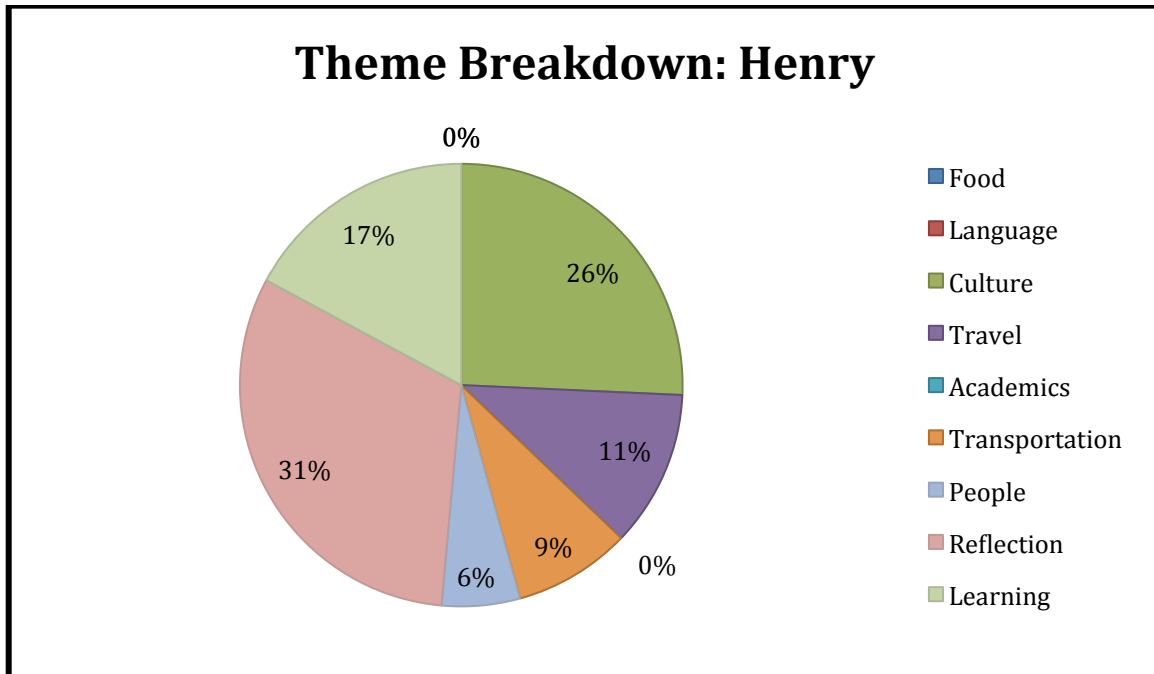


FIGURE 4.5

Only Henry, out of the sample bloggers, has no references to food, language, or academics. That his primary themes of learning are reflection (31%), culture (26%), and acknowledgement of learning (17%) implies that he found the consideration of the experience, rather than the experience itself, as significant (Figure 4.5). Additional themes that surface in Henry's blog are spontaneity, the adventure or challenge of getting lost, and the personal motivation he has for writing his blog. While most bloggers did not offer an explanation as to why they were writing their blogs, Henry provides multiple; one in particular stands out: "I realized that I am not writing to document my journey per say [sic]. I am writing for people to see what I have done and surpass it."

Kevin

When I see "Spa and Wellness Center", I think to myself, "Oh, this will be nice and warm. I'll just relax here for a bit." A Czech sees the same thing, and knows that it's simply a lap pool only a few degrees warmer than the surrounding air, which causes it to mist. –Kevin

Kevin's approach to blogging independently about his time in the Czech Republic was to use humor and story-telling. Through the narrative accounts of his travels, Kevin describes his first time staying in a hostel, attending football and hockey games, and getting lost in Turkey. He seems to be starkly aware of cultural differences, and tends to embrace them despite finding many differences alarming or challenging. He makes references to his parents, possibly an intended audience, throughout the blog, but makes no mention of being homesick. Although he reflects very seldom on his experiences, Kevin's descriptions are rich and detailed, revealing learning in the academic, cultural, and personal areas.

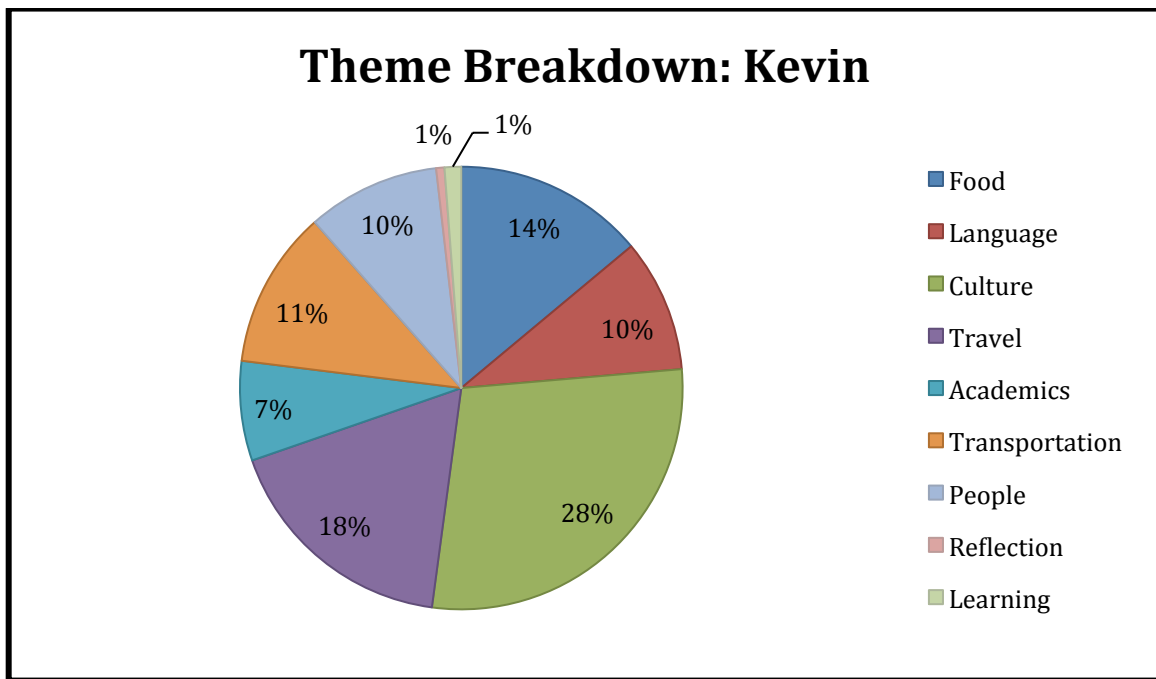


FIGURE 4.6

Figure 4.6 shows how few of Kevin's references are reflective or acknowledging learning. However, the other themes of learning are somewhat closely distributed, due to the descriptions and detail found in most of his posts. Other themes that surface in

Kevin's blog include problems with money and budgeting, his accommodations abroad, and solving problems or overcoming challenges. Some of Kevin's references, especially those to culture, are critical and can be seen as offensive, particularly his negative remarks about the United States. Despite his occasionally derogatory attitude, Kevin still tries new cultural experiences, such as going to a ballet and to an opera—neither of which he found enjoyable.

Lynne

This has been an unbelievable experience - enough so that I can't really contemplate leaving the country that's been my home for the past semester...It's hard to put this feeling into words. –Lynne

Lynne, a USC blogger studying abroad in Wales, keeps a detailed and reflective blog that documents her time in her host country, as well as her extensive travels around Europe. Her posts are relatively frequent, with a few gaps always made up with an apology in the following post. In her posts about traveling, she describes herself writing the posts short hand, in a journal, and often on a train en route to the next location, before typing them up and publishing them onto the internet. This method is an interesting writing technique that no other blogger describes themselves as using. Due in part to this method of journaling first on paper, Lynne's posts are filled with description and content that seems to fill in every moment of an experience. She maintains a narrative tone throughout her blog, writing stories chronologically and occasionally including metaphors. Lynne had only one photo in her blog, possibly due to camera troubles she admits to having encountered.

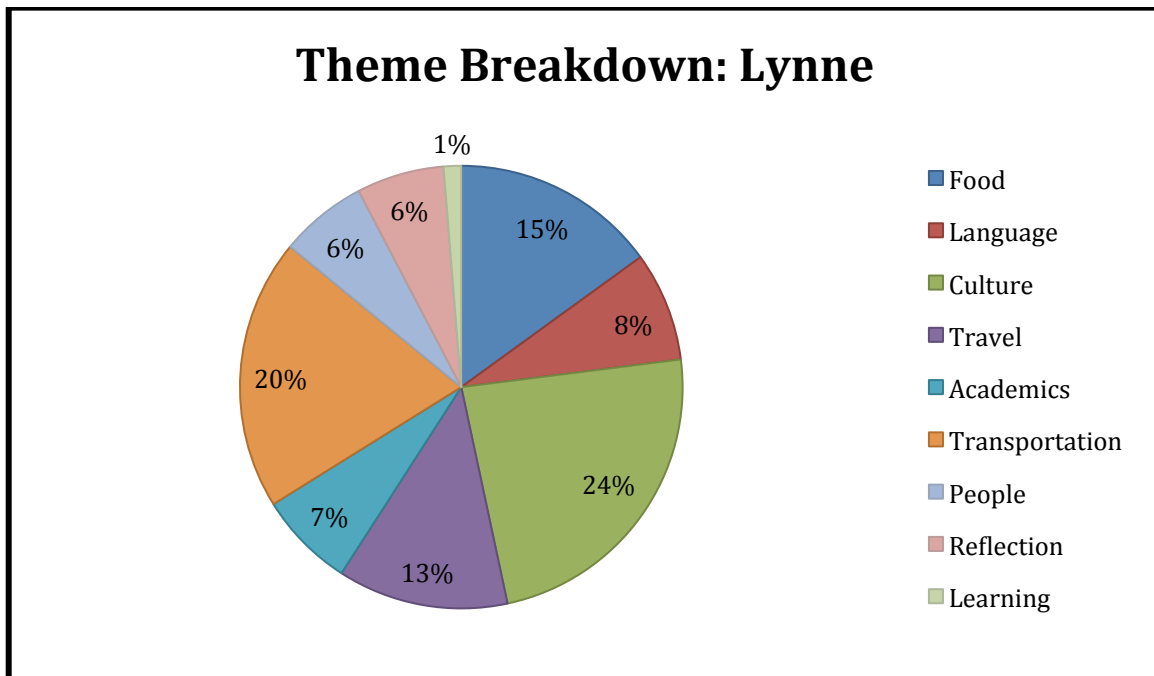


FIGURE 4.7

Perhaps most interesting about Lynne's theme of learning references is her strong favor of transportation (Figure 4.7). From her second post, Lynne writes about her challenging and unexpected experiences with public transportation, from buses to taxis to trains. "Bus tickets are harder than you'd expect," she admits explaining that the subtle language differences and the currency make buying a bus ticket less than straightforward. Lynne also found lessons in the food early on when her new Welsh friends gave her a "tour of all the foods I'd gotten 'wrong'" and taught her that "Hershey's chocolate is terrible." Lynne also wrote about challenges with money, getting involved on campus, and homesickness.

Nancy

They insisted that I take class and I'm learning that it's harder to turn somebody down in Mandarin than in English, so I put my heels on and danced. If you know me well, you're probably laughing while you read this because I'm a bunhead and Latin Dancing is a far cry from my usual self, but I surprised myself a bit and even made a couple of new Chinese friends. -Nancy

A second-time USC blogger, Nancy previously blogged for USC during a summer in China. During her blog used in this study, she writes from China once again, this time for a full semester. Her program is Mandarin Chinese intensive, which means that one of her primary purposes for studying abroad is for language acquisition. In her blog, Nancy describes the strict guidelines she and other students in her program are under according to the contract they signed; they must speak no English during the weekdays between the hours of 8:00 am and 8:00 pm. Nancy is also a recipient of a national scholarship and is taking part in research about the relationship between Chinese politics and dance. A dance and political science double major at USC, Nancy frequently seeks out experiences—both in and outside the classroom—that correspond with these interests. Her posts, which typically include photos and captions, are both reflective and descriptive, and her references to learning are spread out over a variety of themes.

Nancy's cultural references are, though varied, often centered around the political issues in China. She also writes about culture shock, makes cultural comparison between her host city, other cities in China, and the US, and describes her daily routines in China. Since her study abroad program is centered on language learning, it is not surprising that her references to language make up 15% of all her themes of learning instances (Figure 4.8). Through her travels on the Silk Road and through other parts of her host country, Nancy experiences the challenges of transportation, communication, and being a vegetarian in China. Nancy also writes frequently about the ways in which she gets involved in her community as well as the multifaceted purposes of her blog.

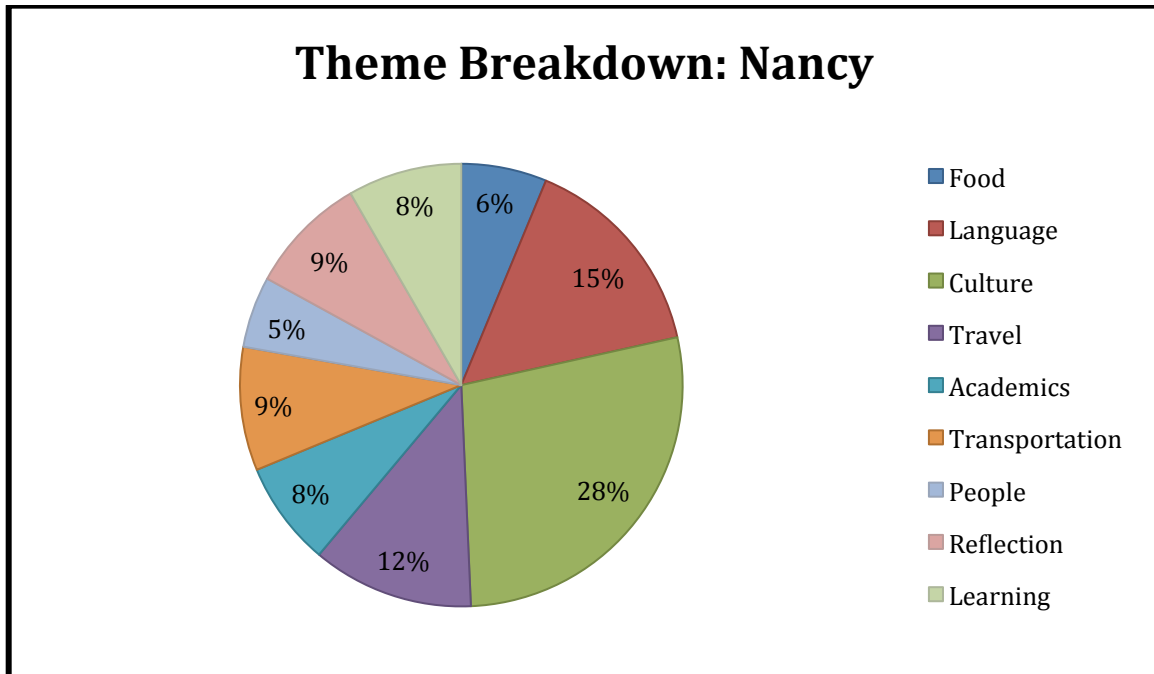


FIGURE 4.8

Natalie

I love that I have made myself stay in one place for a good bit of time even though there is so much to see down here. I've found this peace of mind that I hope to keep with me when I go back to the city and have a busier life with school and all. Living this simple life just makes sense...having too much seems to pollute us into thinking we don't have enough. There is clarity when materialistic things don't bog us down. —Natalie

Natalie's journeys in New Zealand begin with a quick lesson in public transportation. As evidenced by her breakdown of themes of learning, these lessons continue throughout her time abroad. Natalie's experience abroad, documented through her independent blog, is unique in that she spends the first several weeks after her arrival traveling around New Zealand, meeting locals and new people, and even briefly working as a nanny. Although she had not officially begun her study abroad semester during these posts, they became informative to the rest of her semester and certainly involved learning across multiple capacities. Natalie engages in a variety of challenges, including hiking, bungee jumping, and skiing—during which her previously injured knee becomes

reinjured. She describes multiple experiences of hitch hiking and couch surfing—an internet-based company that sets up travelers with hosts in order to provide a cheap or free place to stay.

By October, Natalie has been in New Zealand for four months, and she makes the decision to remain for an additional semester. Her posts tend to focus on big events or travels rather than every day life, and she often writes about culture in a way that suggests she is comfortable or relatively unsurprised by the differences.

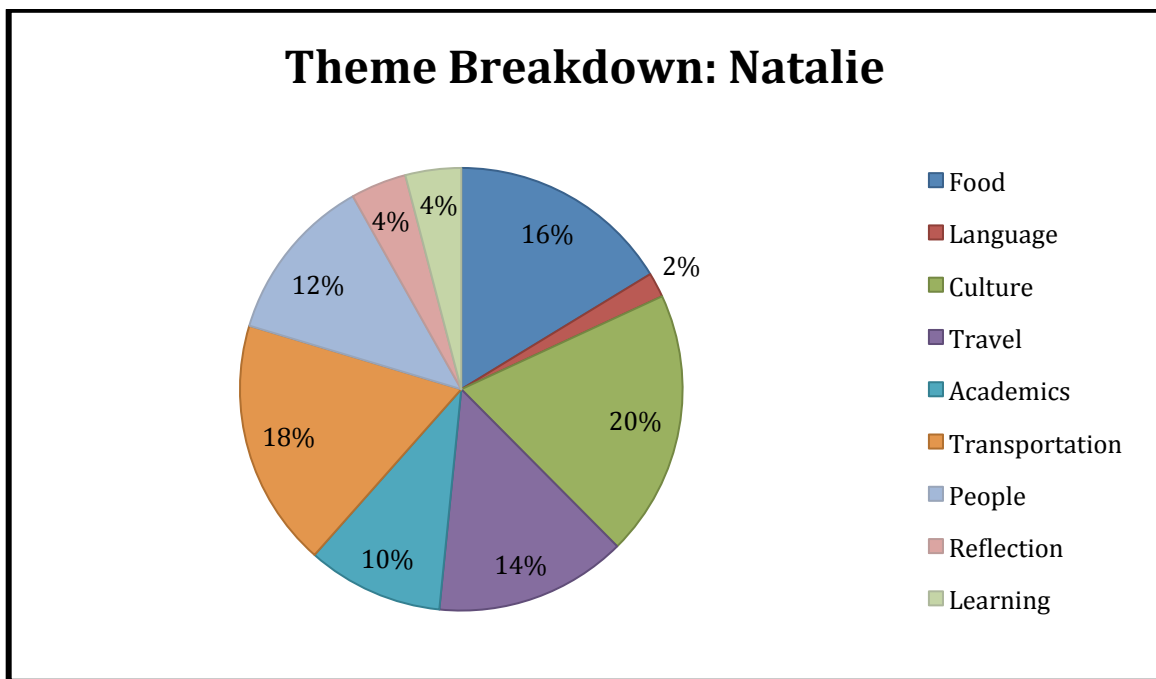


FIGURE 4.9

Figure 4.9 shows the themes of learning that were most present in Natalie’s blog. Much of the transportation references are Natalie’s descriptions of hitch hiking, and the challenges or otherwise that occur with this experience. Her cultural references are a combination of attending sporting events, the social culture around different cities, and food, such as a New Zealand “BBQ.” Natalie also writes frequently about her interactions with locals, meeting new people, and building relationships—and the way in which these

encounters impact her. After meeting an inspirational New Zealander, Natalie shares a quote from him as “parting words” in a blog post: “I go to bed every night thinking, ‘If I don’t wake up the next morning, today was a good day.’” It’s nice to hear that from someone who really means it.” Natalie also writes about the ways in which she challenges herself and the times when she must act quickly and solve problems.

Nicole

As I reflect on my past weeks here, I cannot believe how much I’ve learned and changed. This experience has taught me more about myself and others than I could ever imagine. I feel like I have such a better grasp on my feelings, what I can handle, and what I look for in a friend. –Nicole

Nicole, a USC blogger studying abroad in Italy, finds a good balance between writing descriptively and writing reflectively. Spending about as many posts describing her travels as she does her life in her host city, Nicole uses a combination of photos and text to fully describe her experiences. She takes time to describe her explorations around her host city and often connects these explorations to her course work. She admits that when she found out she would be required to visit at least six museums as part of a History of Museums course, she “thought it would be a pain, but visiting the museums has allowed me to explore [host city].” Nicole’s focus on academics, her awareness of learning, and her educational posts are possibly reflections of her motivations as a USC blogger.

Nicole’s frequent references of culture, travel, and food are all related to the large number of posts that she devoted to describing her trips (Figure 4.10). Throughout her travels around Europe, Nicole describes challenging experiences that include overcoming language barriers, trying new foods, embracing culture, and navigating public transportation. Nicole also deals acutely with homesickness, more than any other blogger

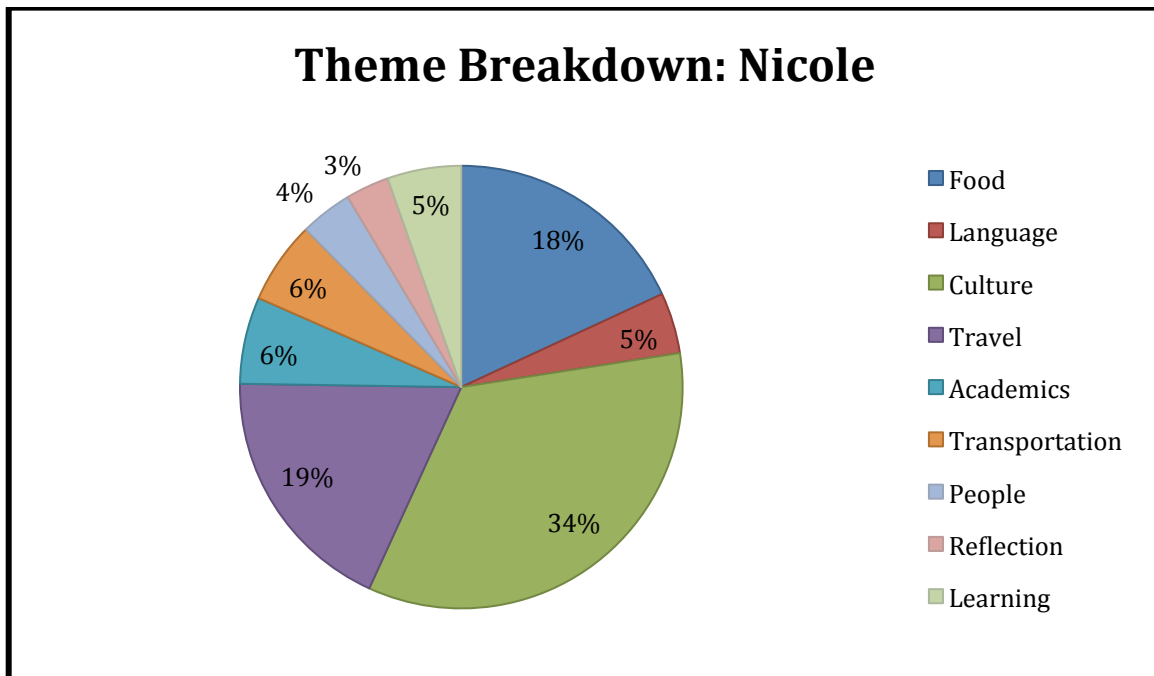


FIGURE 4.10

in this study. Her homesickness is especially apparent when a hurricane makes ground in the US and effects her family. However, she later acknowledges, “once I finally admitted that I was homesick, I got a lot better at dealing with it. There are so many great things about studying abroad and it is OK to miss home while experiencing new and exciting adventures.” Nicole’s accounts on her blog reveal development in the learning outcome areas of academic, cultural, and eventually, personal.

Tom

...listening comprehension is my weak point, but I felt like I made a ton of progress just listening to the tour guide. I could understand a lot more than I thought I'd be able to. Going to a country where you are forced to speak and hear the language you're trying to learn is no doubt the best way to go. –Tom

Tom wrote an independent blog during his semester abroad in Spain. Like other bloggers in this study, he approaches many challenges with humor and maintains a general tone of informal comedy throughout his blog. Using mostly narratives, Tom primarily writes about his travels outside of the host city, but occasionally describes day-

to-day occurrences. Unique to Tom's blog when compared to the others in this study is his frequent incorporation of the host country language. Although usually done informally or amidst a sentence written in English, Tom uses his blog as a way to express his interest in and learning of the language. Early on, he writes that he hopes to compose some posts entirely in Spanish, but his posts remain primarily in English.

His informal language (in both Spanish and English) creates a comfortable space, and it seems as though he is talking to a friend throughout his narrative posts. Tom's excitement for the culture and willingness to learn is evidenced throughout the blog, particularly in his detailed accounts of his lifestyle in a "residencia," where he lives with other students from around the world and builds genuine relationships.

Tom's frequent references to culture, as seen in Figure 4.11, may also be attributed to his desire to learn and to make the most of his experience. Tom often writes about food, usually writing the names of the dishes in Spanish and providing his opinion of them. His transportation experiences are often part of his travels, but he also signs up for a bike pass, which he continues to utilize throughout his host city during his time in Spain. When he receives his pass, he explains why this form of transportation will be beneficial: "I'm super excited, because, por ejemplo, if i need to go to El Corte Ingles (the walmart of espana) to pick up some necessities, itll now be a 10 minute fun bike ride instead of an hour-long walking trek..." Tom also references his accommodations frequently, as well as offering comparisons between his present travels and those he has completed prior to this blog.

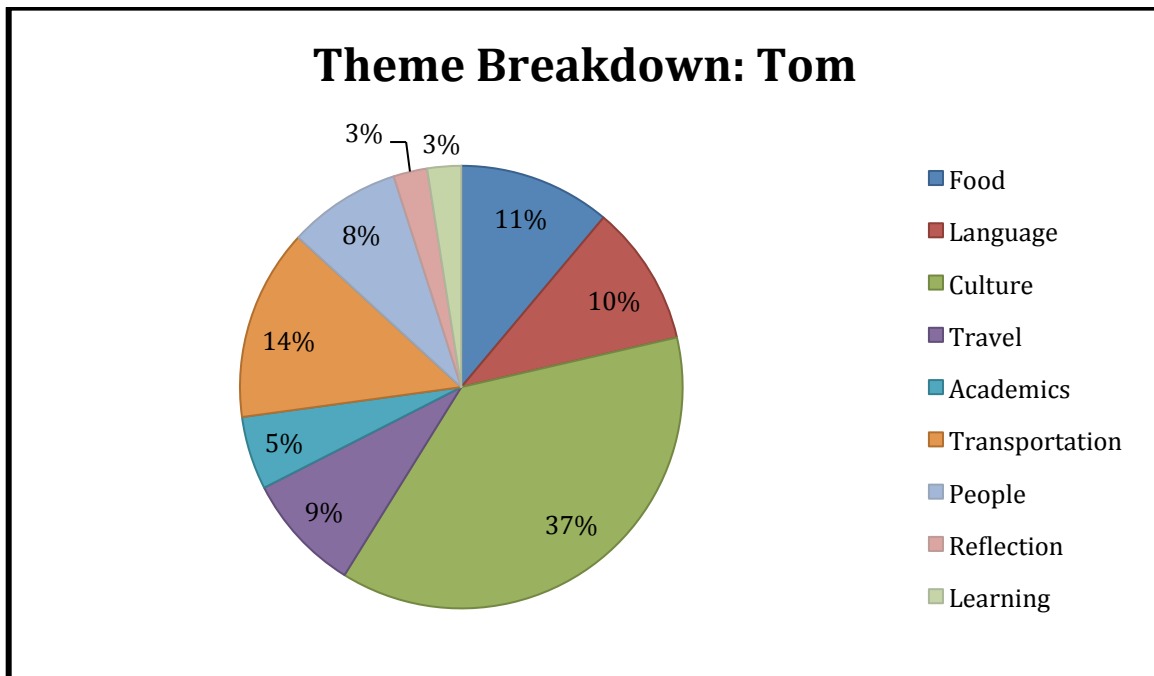


FIGURE 4.11

Yvonne

As my time in Sevilla comes to an end, I've been doing a lot of walking around to my favorite spots in the city to kind of "say goodbye" to them. I'm reminded of the city's motto: "No me ha dejado." It means "she has not left me" in English, and is a testament to the loyalty and faithfulness of Sevilla to a past king. –Yvonne

Yvonne's independent blog is a descriptive and informative account of her semester in Spain. Although not as intensive as Nancy's program, Yvonne's program includes language courses that she refers to throughout her blog. She offers interesting insights in the culture, and usually accompanies her post with a group of photos and captions. Like Nicole, Yvonne refers to her courses when she visits museums and connects these two learning experiences together. Her awareness of cultural differences, or the way in which she describes these differences, make her blog unique. She uses four separate posts to describe the four Spanish meals: breakfast, lunch, tapas, and dinner. She also recounts her experience of going to a bullfight, an event which she found challenging to her beliefs as well as to her cultural assumptions. Yvonne's learning is

made apparent through her descriptions of these events that were significant to her, and this learning falls into each of the learning outcomes categories.

With the exception of a large percentage for cultural references and a small percentage for references to people, Yvonne's themes of learning are almost evenly split (Figure 4.12). This split may be attributed to Yvonne's tendency to include a variety of information in each blog post. Her relatively high percentage of acknowledgement of learning references is interesting but not surprising, since she frequently relays information that she has learned from a tour guide, local, course, or other source to her blog readers. Other topics covered in Yvonne's blogs include considering her host country as a home and descriptions of architecture.

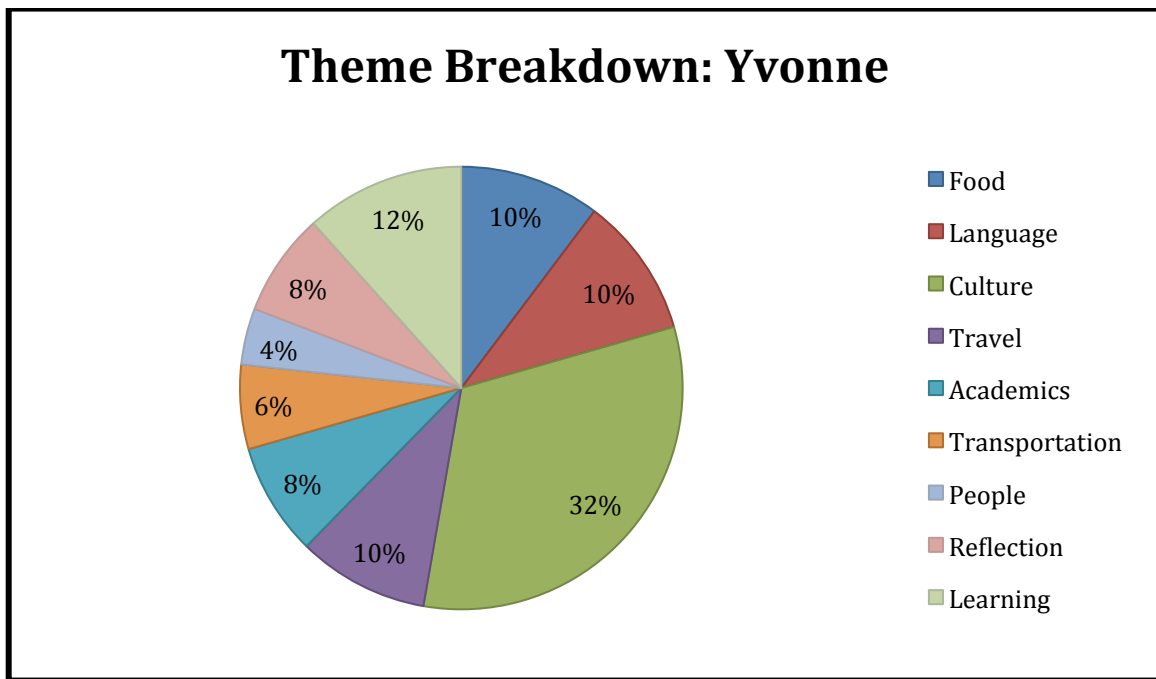


FIGURE 4.12

Discussion of Results

Throughout my discussion of the results, I refer to the nine themes of learning as they occur across the student blogs. These themes are largely the answer to my first research question: what are students choosing to write about in their blogs while they are abroad? These categories are much more complex than the single word I have used to describe them up to this point. In order to leave little room for interpretation, further clarification of these themes is provided, including a definition, description, and rationale for each. Just as the significance of an experience was largely defined by the student blogger, so will these themes be largely defined by the myriad ways students chose to write about them.

Each theme of learning is able to be connected to at least one known study abroad effect, allowing research question 2 to be answered: do these various stories document the known effects of study abroad, and if so, how? Not every known study abroad effect is captured in the 11 sample blogs, and the ways in which students point to these effects varies greatly from blog to blog. Some, such as language acquisition, are easily identifiable; others, such as intellectual development, are more difficult to capture. Connections between the themes of learning, the known study abroad effects, and the quotes from blogs are exhibited clearly and logically.

In addition, I connect many of the Study Abroad Learning Outcomes to these themes, some of the outcomes overlapping across categories. Since the themes were identified as organically surfacing from the student blogs, these learning outcomes were not used to create them; rather, the outcomes will aid in the defining and clarification of the meaning of each theme of learning. By identifying which themes are also connected

TABLE 4.2 Relationship Between Themes of Learning and Framework of Study

Theme of Learning	Study Abroad Learning Outcomes A = Academic, C = Cultural, P = Personal	Known Study Abroad Effects
Culture	C1; C2; C3; C4; C5; C6	Multicultural Competence (flexibility) Multicultural Competence (cultural awareness) Professional Applicability (cross cultural communication) Shift in Identity
Food	C1; C4; P2; P3	Professional Applicability (independence) Life Enhancement (independence)
Travel	A2; C2; C4; C5; P3	Multicultural Competence (global awareness)
Transportation	C6; P2; P3	Professional Applicability (adaptability) Professional Applicability (independence) Multicultural Competence (cultural awareness)
Language	A1; C5; C6	Language Acquisition Multicultural Competence (communication) Professional Applicability (second language) Professional Applicability (cross cultural communication)
Academics	A1; A2; A3; P2	Professional Applicability (international perspective) Life Enhancement (time management)
People	C3; C4; C5; C6	Shift in Identity Professional Applicability (cross cultural communication) Multicultural Competence (cultural awareness)
Reflection	A3; P3; see “Acknowledgment of Learning”	Shift in Identity Professional Applicability Multicultural Competence (cultural awareness) Life Enhancement Language Acquisition Intellectual Development
Acknowledgement of Learning	C2; C4; C6; P2; P3; P4; see “Reflection”	See “Reflection”

to the Study Abroad Learning Outcomes, research question three—How is student learning—cultural, personal, and academic—evident in the study abroad blog, if at all?— is also answered. Table 4.2 shows how the research questions are answered across each theme of learning. The USC Study Abroad Learning Outcomes are identifiable in Table 4.2 based on the category under which they fall and the corresponding numerical outcome. Although these learning outcomes can be found in Appendix A, I have included them in this chapter for easier reference and better understanding of the data found in Table 4.2:

Globally competent students graduating from the University of South Carolina, as a result of their overseas experiences:

Academic:

1. Understand their academic discipline within an international context.
2. Demonstrate knowledge of global issues, processes, trends and systems.
3. Are actively engaged in the learning process.

Cultural:

1. Have developed a profound understanding and appreciation of their own culture.
2. Actively seek out diverse, challenging experiences.
3. Exhibit an awareness of and respect for diversity in all forms.
4. Display an understanding of values, beliefs, traditions, and perspectives different from their own.
5. Communicate effectively across cultures, preferably in a second or third language.
6. Demonstrate an appreciation of, and open - mindedness toward, other cultures.

Personal:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of how their own values, beliefs, and cultural biases influence their relationships with others.
2. Are able to approach life with a high degree of flexibility, adaptability, independence, and self confidence.
3. Demonstrate the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and cope effectively with ambiguous and unfamiliar situations.
4. Have explored, examined, and strengthened career goals.
5. Draw upon diverse cultural frames of reference in daily life.

Culture

As previously explained, many of the other major themes of learning fall under the culture category. However, it became important to draw culture out as its own category because the scope of the definition is so large. Peterson, et al. (2007) define culture as “the ‘set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs’ (UNESCO)” (p. 178). This definition of culture speaks to the depth and complexity of the term and to the importance of taking note of all mentions of culture in the student blogs, not simply the ones that fall into other categories.

Consistent with the term’s complexity, students choose to write about culture in diverse and fascinating ways. Bloggers often make cultural comparisons between the host country and United States—often within the context of culture shock, but also make observations within the context of the host culture itself. Through these comparative

cultural observations, students move toward USC's Cultural Learning Outcome 1: "Have developed a profound understanding and appreciation of their own culture" (Appendix A). Other aspects of culture that students write about include: food as a way to understand or experience culture, lifestyle, history, pop culture, cultural idiosyncrasies, and culture as learned through interactions with people. As made apparent through blogger descriptions of encountering culture, these various experiences point to the USC Cultural Learning Outcomes 1-6.

Some students describe the ways in which they embraced the culture around them. In a post titled "Comments on Italian Culture," Nicole explains how she sometimes feels challenged by culture, because "the cultural differences in Italy can be overwhelming at times. I find myself getting frustrated, but I remind myself it is part of this great experience." Despite her frustration, at the end of the same post, she identifies a cultural difference to which she is adapting: "...the Italians have conservation down to a science. I started to turn off the water while showering in order to conserve energy. It is something I hope to take back to the States with me." After a visit to Shanghai, Nancy finds appreciation for her host city and identifies her desire to fully "live" in China:

And now I'm back in [host city], it's Sunday night, and I'm in a coffee shop and a cat is brushing up against my legs. I can hear horns honking outside and see the rain drizzling in front of the street lights. As much I love seeing sights and visiting museums and running around China seeing all of the *stuff*, what I really want is to just *be* here- to do life here, to go to a local cafe on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon, to be known by the people I buy my eggs from every morning, to watch the seasons change from summer to fall to winter to spring... and I don't

want to feel like a tourist. If there is one thing I hate, it is feeling like I am neither here nor there, that I lack connection to a place because I am just passing through. [Host city] is a place I could live in. Shanghai is a place I might visit. And that's okay.

Natalie also recognizes an aspect of culture that she would like to adopt: "I love the lifestyle of not having a car (and living in a place where life still goes on without one)." Tom invests in his host city's "bike system" to make local travel more manageable, and Alice purchases a bike when she discovers that "to cycle or not to cycle is not the question - in fact, it's not even an option here in [the Netherlands]. The bike population is larger than the human population and 57% of all trips in the city are made by bike." By fully participating in various acts of a host country's culture, students exhibit Cultural Learning Outcome 6: "demonstrate an appreciation of, and open-mindedness toward, other cultures" (Appendix A).

Although lifestyle aspects of culture are significant to many of the bloggers, the larger, more obvious cultural differences also find a place in many of the blogs. Festivals, events, art, dancing, and history are examples of these more apparent differences. Even though these aspects of culture may be known to the student before arrival in the host country, a great deal of learning may still occur when experienced first hand. Consider Tom's account of a visit to a "gypsy cave to watch a Flamenco show" during travel outside of his host city:

Flamenco is a dance style unique to espana [sic], originating in sevilla [sic], that is a deep part of the gypsy culture; I'd heard a lot about it and had high expectations for it...the whole experience was just great. Like, this was true spanish [sic]

culture, true GYPSY culture. I just felt like I had learned so much from viewing it, it was great.

Yvonne went “to a bullfight (or *corrida de toros*) in the *Plaza de Toros* in Sevilla, the oldest in Spain...I learned a lot I didn’t know about bullfights, including how I personally feel about them.” Her account of the event includes a list of cultural observations, as well as her final opinion of the violent event:

As for my reaction to the seemingly senseless cruelty shown to a helpless animal, I’m on the fence. I understand why it draws a crowd; a bullfight is certainly a spectacle for Spaniards and tourists alike. It’s very exciting to watch and interesting to learn about the different traditions that accompany it. On the other hand, killing 6 bulls a day seems a little excessive. They also go through a lot of visible suffering before finally collapsing and dying. However, I never really felt ‘appalled’ by the violence, or anything...whatever the reason I was able to enjoy the sport of the bullfight without being preoccupied with the gore of it all.

Though Tom had “high expectations” for the Flamenco event, Yvonne was unsure about the bullfight. For Yvonne to not only attend the event, but to consider the bullfight critically and from the perspective of the Spanish people shows a development of multicultural awareness and competency. Both Tom’s and Yvonne’s experiences point to the Cultural Learning Outcome number 4, since they clearly “display an understanding of values, beliefs, traditions, and perspectives different from their own” (Appendix A).

The examples of bloggers adapting to every day cultural idiosyncrasies and those reflecting on their attendance at cultural events all show a certain level of openness on the part of the student. In her study, Kitsantas (2004) utilizes the Cross Cultural Adaptability

Inventory (CCAI), which measures cross-cultural effectiveness of students based on four categories, including “Flexibility/Openness.” According to Kitsantas (2004), this category “assesses one’s willingness to be receptive and enjoy different ways of thinking and behaving in a new environment. It measures interest in unfamiliar people and ideas, tolerance toward others and flexibility with regard to new experiences” (p. 444). Nicole, Nancy, Natalie, Tom, Alice, and Yvonne each show flexibility according to Kitsantas’ (2004) definition, indicating that, within the cultural theme, there exists evidence of multicultural competence, a known study abroad effect.

Food

Food is a theme of learning that often fell under the theme of culture—but not always. Many students wrote about food in terms of trying something new or challenging themselves, two areas that fit into USC’s Cultural Learning Outcomes. However, references to food were not consistently cultural. For many students, food was a social experience, often accompanied with meeting new people, spending time with friends, or a larger story of travel. Bloggers’ references to food, be they cultural, social, or part of a broader experience, point to numbers 2 and 3 of the USC Personal Learning Outcomes: “are able to approach life with a high degree of flexibility, adaptability, independence, and self-confidence” and “demonstrate the ability to...cope effectively with ambiguous and unfamiliar situations” (Appendix A).

Yvonne’s descriptions of food were the most focused and intentional compared to the other bloggers. She uses four separate blog posts to describe the food in Spain, divided by breakfast, lunch, tapas, and dinner. In these posts, she explains the cultural expectations behind each meal and how she is learning to adjust to these differences. In

her description of tapas, “similar to appetizers in America,” Yvonne explains that these small portions

can serve as your entire dinner or something to share with friends before eating a meal. They are very representative of the social nature of Spanish people; it’s very common to see people who have just gotten off work crowding around an outdoor table at a restaurant to grab a quick *tapa* with their friends.

Her understanding of how food, in this case, reflects the nature of Spanish people implies learning through observation and shows that she is making meaning of this simple experience of eating tapas. When Lynne goes to visit her friend in Ireland, she is met with surprise by a home cooked meal, which makes her feel “very welcome and at home.” Her friend’s mother

...had made this absolutely amazing meal with shepherd’s pie, salad, bread, corn, pistachios (these aren’t mixed together, by the way) and a dessert of what I think was meringue but I’m not totally sure. Whatever it was, it was spectacular...I couldn’t have asked for better hosts.

Lynne’s decision to include the details of each aspect of the meal means that she finds significance in what she was served; within context, there is an implication that she recognizes these dishes and the hospitality as reflective of Irish culture. Kevin writes comically about an expected moment while traveling in Europe:

I ordered what I believed to be a cheeseburger. It was called a cheeseburger. It looked like a cheeseburger. Turns out the Czechs don’t realize the word ‘burger’ alludes to some sort of meat. When I bit into the sandwich from hell, I got a big mouthful of bread and fried mozzarella.

Lynne, Yvonne, and Kevin offer cultural references to food, which can be seen in both the themes of culture and of food. These examples show evidence of cultural aspects of learning, particularly Learning Outcome 4.

The references to food which refer to more than culture or to an aspect other than culture are primarily social or experiential—that is, described as a personal experience. Two bloggers describe their experiences celebrating Thanksgiving, an American holiday typified by home cooked meals and family time, in another country. Despite her commitment to her immersive experience, Nancy is glad when she and some friends “were able to eat a Thanksgiving-style meal at a nearby expat-run restaurant. I am so thankful for this group of people right here [in this photograph].” Nicole offers more details in the process of her Thanksgiving in Italy:

I had one of the best Thanksgiving’s ever in [host city]. I was expecting to be extremely homesick...but [my friends] and I made a great Thanksgiving dinner in [host city]. [My friend] and I picked up the turkey Thursday morning from Mercato Centrale. The butcher removed the turkey’s insides right in front of us...[then] it was time to cook. I was in charge of mashed potatoes, gravy, and wine. I made everything from scratch with a little help from my friends, of course. We all cooked in the kitchen and it was hectic, but so much fun...We also had veggies, stuffing, and cranberry sauce. For dessert, we had pumpkin pie (the only thing not homemade), cupcakes, and awesome apple pie desserts. The most Italian thing at the dinner table was the wine. Besides the great food, we just had a great time together.

Lynne receives a package from home with some of her favorite foods from the US that she admits she has “been missing.” These references to food that is typically American does not imply a lack of learning on the students’ parts; rather, these examples point toward Cultural Learning Outcome number 1: “have developed a profound understanding and appreciation of their own culture.” Perhaps a Thanksgiving meal or a package from home do not qualify as “profound,” but by recognizing the aspects of their own culture that they miss, students are moving towards achievement of this outcome.

Food also allowed students to explore or develop their independence. Nicole explains that her orientation in Italy includes “cooking classes so we can prepare food at our apartments! I need all the help I can get.” Later, she reveals that she has put these classes to use, although perhaps not very effectively: “cooking does not run in our family (ask...my roommates who have watched me attempt to cook).” For Nicole, it is more about the “attempt” to cook, and to exercise that independence, than the outcome of the meal. Alice describes a time when she and a friend “made dinner...the first legitimate, hand made, specifically shopped for, sauteed [sic], sit down dinner in Europe. And it was absolutely fabulous.” Ten posts later, Alice gives readers a tour of her refrigerator, indicating, perhaps, that she has gone shopping and made dinner several times since the first instance, and also revealing a possible development of self-sufficiency. Ashley’s experience with cooking abroad is more similar to Nicole’s, since she admits that she does not particularly enjoy cooking. She writes,

In addition to trying new foods the past few weeks, I have expanded my culinary repertoire in terms of cooking. I have evolved from heavy PB&J reliance to making real meals like pasta with grilled asparagus in a lemon sauce, boiled potatoes and

salad, and vegetable stir fry...I'm just proud of myself for actually cooking since, as I mentioned before, I love food but not the process it takes to make it edible.

Towards the end of her semester, Ashley admits that she is looking forward to going back to the states and “having someone else cook for 2 months.” Despite her dislike of cooking, Ashley seems to have overcome this challenge by trying to cook, further developing herself as an independent individual.

Independence is not only an aspect of Personal Learning Outcome number 2, but the development of independence implies a larger move towards an important known study abroad effect: professional/career applicability. Franklin (2010) found that students in her study cited “independence” as an “area of personal growth” that was “professionally applicable” (p. 185). Fry, et al. (2009) found that, for students surveyed in their study on the effects of study abroad, “learning how to cook was possibly one of the most mentioned responses about the experience, and can be seen as an important metaphor for the type of maturation that happens on study abroad” (p. 38). Food and the ways in which the blogger choose to write about it offer only one example of ways the students develop independence during a study abroad program.

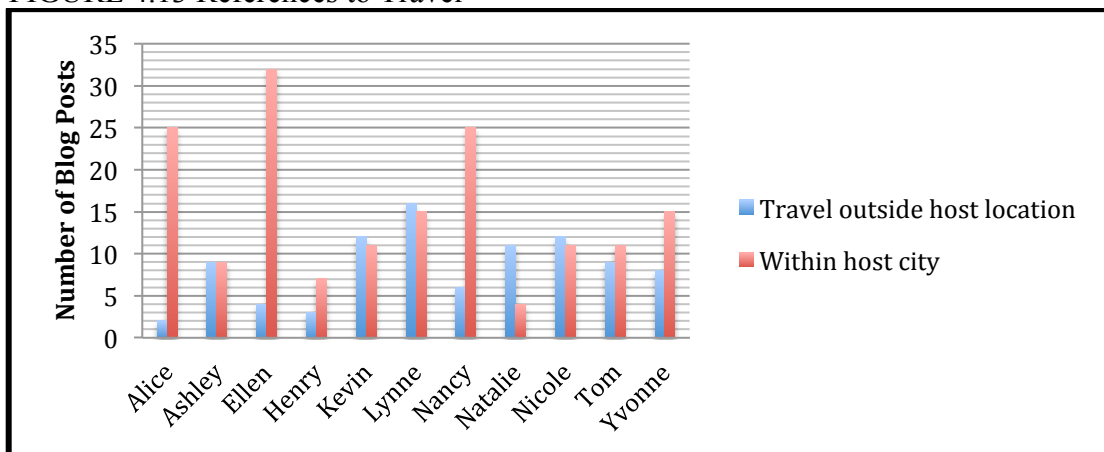
Travel

Students write extensively about the traveling experiences that they have; these experiences may occur in the host city, within the host country, or in surrounding/nearby countries. Through independent and group travel, students encounter language barriers, unexpected challenges that allow them to be problem solvers, and historical and cultural learning experiences. Travel, then, became defined by a combination of independently planned trips, program- or host institution-organized trips, the exploring or adventures

that occurred during these trips or within the host city, and, occasionally, the travel to and from the US to the host country. Every blogger has at least two blog posts devoted entirely to a trip outside of the host location. Including the individual references to exploring, associated challenges with travel, and planning independent trips, references to travel make up 13% of the themes of learning.

A significant finding of this study is that many students write as much about their travels outside of their host location as they do about their day-to-day life or other topics within their host location. Figure 4.13 shows that only Alice, Ellen, and Nancy spend significantly more posts describing experiences within the host location or other non-travel occurrences. The rest of the bloggers spend at least a comparable amount of posts describing experiences in their host location and outside of their host location. The implication here is that students find their travels during study abroad to be just as significant, if not more in some cases, as the time that they spend in their host location.

FIGURE 4.13 References to Travel



Natalie, who spends 73.3% of her blog posts writing about her travels, shows some of the learning that may occur during independent travel through her account of a trip to Fiji:

Upon arriving in Fiji, [my friends] and I had absolutely no plans. We had a couch surfing host set up to meet us at the airport, but that was as far as we got. In our minds, we would land, walk to a beach, get a drink, and figure it out from there. Our ignorance of what Fiji really consisted of was quite evident when we arrived. Our host...picked us up at the Nadi airport and brought us back to her house. It seemed to be quite a busy place with a lot of [people] coming and going. We got settled and changed and headed upstairs to hang out with everyone. Our first question, due to our ignorance, was ‘where is the beach?’ Everyone laughed at us and informed us that there wasn’t one in Nadi!

Natalie’s anecdote is simple and comical, but underneath the humor is a layer of learning. Prior to her trip, Natalie is “ignorant” about the geography, and perhaps more, of the island of Fiji. Within a day of arriving, her lack of knowledge has already been confronted and she will combat this experience by learning: “we headed back home and all took some time to sort our next couple days. We decided to spend our next three nights in the islands- two at Mana and one at Beachcomber.” When Ashley visits Paris, she finds that her expectations are also challenged:

Oddly enough, I think I have a more romanticized [sic] idea of Paris now than I did before I went. People who have visited before have told me that it’s dirty, overcrowded, and a number of other negative things. The city certainly was dirty (my shoes and pants always ended up covered in a solid layer of dust) and there are without a doubt a ton of people there, but those kinds of things were less striking to me than the beauty of the architecture, the history of the city, and the cool graffiti.

All throughout the student blogs, bloggers describe scenarios similar to Natalie's and Ashley's stories. What they think they know about a city or a country is challenged in big or small ways. Kevin traveled to Budapest, Hungary during his semester in the Czech Republic. With a critical eye towards the architecture, he admits,

I was expecting a place that looked like Moscow; white stucco buildings with those onion-topped castles from the movies. The east side of the river, Pest, was populated with Rococo style buildings in a very downtown-esque city layout. The west, very much like Prague, houses all the touristy stuff.

After traveling around China, Nancy writes, "I think I could live here for the rest of my life and never spend a day not being surprised at how rich and diverse and complex China is." Despite her already extensive travels, Nancy still finds aspects of the country that surprise her and challenge the notions she had already formed in her head about her host country.

These examples of students' expectations being confronted during their travels and their willingness to learn from these confrontations shows evidence of Cultural Learning Outcome 4: "display an understanding of values, beliefs, traditions, and perspectives different from their own" and the first part of Personal Learning Outcome 3: "demonstrate the ability to think critically..." (Appendix A). Sutton & Rubin (2004) conducted a study on the learning outcomes of study abroad. In this study of 225 students, researchers found that "students who studied abroad exceed the comparison group [those who did not study abroad] on the following measures: functional knowledge, knowledge of world geography, knowledge of cultural relativism, and knowledge of global interdependence" (p. 71). Each of these areas cited by Sutton &

Rubin (2004) as developed during study abroad, particularly the former two, are evident through these stories of challenged expectations as shared by the bloggers. The latter two will be displayed more effectively in different themes of learning, namely People, Language, and Reflection.

Travel also gave students the opportunity to deal with challenging or ambiguous situations (Personal Learning Outcome 3), increase in understanding of political or global issues (Academic Learning Outcome 2), take part in challenging experiences (Cultural Learning Outcome 2), and practice cross-cultural communication (Cultural Learning Outcome 5). After arriving in Paris, Lynne describes her experience of getting

...briefly lost on the way to the metro, where I bought a 5-trip pass before going to the hostel. I successfully made it to my stop and after being helped by two different people reached the –once again –poorly marked hostel. I’d begun to suspect that they chose difficult locations for hostels on purpose just to mess with us. You want adventure? *You’ve got it, kid.*

Lynne is not alone in her experience of getting lost and having to seek help from strangers. Ellen, Henry, Ashley, Kevin, and Natalie also describe similar experiences; common in each of these accounts is that, one way or another, the bloggers problem solve and find their way to the intended destination. Through the unexpected challenges of traveling, these students exhibit Personal Learning Outcome 3: “demonstrate the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and cope effectively with ambiguous and unfamiliar situations” (Appendix A).

Nancy displays Academic Learning Outcome 2 when she visits “the Ta’er Monastery (also called Kumbum) in the Tibetan cultural region Amdo, in Qinghai

province.” She explains that this Tibetan Buddhist Monastery “was established in 1583 by Tsongkhapa , the founder of the Gelugpa or Yellow Hat Sect of Tibetan Buddhism.” Several posts later, Nancy shares parts of an assignment that she wrote for a class on the Ta’er Monastery in which she uses a photo to discuss the political implications of this site:

The photo at the Ta’er Monastery represents the state’s promotion and development of a minority culture’s religion- Tibetan Buddhism- within the tourism industry. As a visitor at the Ta’er Monastery I was able to learn about Tibetan Buddhism beliefs and practices and get a glimpse of Tibetan Buddhist monks living and worshipping at the Monastery, but the experience also made me keenly aware of the clear divide between the majority (Han Chinese, and in some ways, any foreigners who were visiting as tourists) and the minority, due to some key dynamics of the situation.

Her “keen awareness” is not an uncommon trait among the bloggers. Tom visits Morocco during his semester in Spain, and passes through an impoverished area while riding on camels with his tour group:

...where they ended up taking us was the true, poor, poor, poor slums of morocco [sic]...theres [sic] no vegetation, no grass, just groups of tiny little houses made 100% out of dirt, and some little 5 year old kids running around in ratty clothes and no shoes. That, now, was a sight to see. Something else I’ll never forget: no matter how poor these tiny dirt/lean-to houses were, every single one of them had a giant satellite dish. Which I guess made sense to me — it must’ve been a) their

one of few sources of happiness/enjoyment, and b) their only way to stay connected to the world around them, via news.

Kitsantas (2004) found that “study abroad programs significantly contribute to the preparation of students to function in a multicultural world and promote international understanding,” noting that these results were consistent with the findings of former research on the same subject (p. 447). As examples, both Nancy and Tom show that they are increasing in their understanding of international issues as a result of travel during study abroad.

While “seeking out diverse, challenging experiences” (Appendix A) does not necessarily fit directly into a known effect of study abroad, it became important in this study to draw out the examples that students write in their blogs of the times in which they challenged themselves. Most of these experiences occurred during travel, which is why they fall under this theme of learning. Natalie was perhaps the blogger who most sought out this type of experience. In her blog, she writes about hiking strenuous trails, bungee jumping and being scared after seeing the ledge, and skiing. She admits to having “mixed feelings of anxiousness, excitement, and nervousness” about skiing, but pushes through these emotions. An unexpected challenge arises when she injures her knee while skiing, but she still manages to find yet another way to challenge herself later in the semester. When Natalie goes scuba diving, she writes that she “was so nervous- it was my first open water dive” and she “was panicking a little” but she ended up having an “INCREDIBLE” experience.

Alice challenges herself, in ways different from Natalie, to fix up an old bike and later, to ‘cycle a long freaking way,’ “preferably...the length of the Netherlands but I was

open to other options just incase I didn't have the time or equipment." Alice never reveals whether she accomplished her lofty goal of cycling across her entire host country, but she does include the story of cycling 62 miles with a professor to a Nazi Transit camp. Ellen went on a camping trip and found the accompanying hike up a mountain to be much harder than she expected; despite her fear and frustration during the hike, she writes, "the day after, as I lay in bed refusing to move, I am pretty proud that I made it to the top. And the bumps and bruises I got along the way make me feel pretty tuff [sic]." Other bloggers wrote about challenges such as traveling alone, trying new foods, and attempting to speak in a second (or third) language.

Transportation

Although an important component of culture, students often referenced the means of transportation they used during their travels or day-to-day life abroad. Transportation references were often accompanied with frustrations and challenges that had to be overcome and the cultural differences between the host country and the US. Forms of transportation included walking, bus, train, plane, boat, taxi, car, and hitch hiking. It is often through these unexpected challenges with transportation that evidence of the Cultural and Personal Learning Outcomes can be seen. Like other themes of learning, transportation allowed students to exercise independence, which falls into professional applicability, as well as gain an appreciation for differences in culture or develop multicultural competence (Franklin, 2010; Fry, 2009). Fry (2009) found that students who studied abroad "appreciated their public transportation systems and enjoyed "car-free" lifestyles with significant walking. Many of them tried to walk more and use public transportation more often" (p.43). Bloggers often referenced their use of public

transportation or walking within their host city; while some found the changes difficult to adjust to, others seemed to embrace them very quickly.

Alice's acceptance of and participation in the cycling culture is one example. After learning how to cycle her way through the city, Alice becomes grateful for the "extremely flat" geography of the Netherlands. "This truth comes in handy," she writes, "when one is biking... basically the Netherlands is biking heaven." In a reflection post, Alice tells readers that she is "still cycling" even though she is now back in the US, where the hilly land is not ideal for this activity. Although Ashley is looking forward to "having a car for trips to the grocery store at school" when she returns to the US, she mentions walking and using public transportation a great deal throughout her blog, including the day she bought a bus pass "that gives me unlimited bus rides on all the routes I would take..." and when she "found an easy walking route to campus." She even goes so far as to say that her "morning walks are always enjoyable to me so I'm glad to find a way that will let me take in the crisp morning air while getting me to campus in under an hour."

After nearly two weeks back in the US, Lynne writes, "I also miss public transportation" and Natalie fully embraces the New Zealand tolerance of hitch hiking, references that were often accompanied with meeting new people or being faced with ambiguous situations. By becoming active participants in the transportation forms of their host countries, bloggers "demonstrate an appreciation of, and open-mindedness toward, other cultures" (Appendix A). Their participation may also show that they "are able to approach life with a high degree of flexibility [and] adaptability" (Appendix A).

Students also found the use of transportation abroad to be learning opportunities, either because of unexpected challenges or coping with cultural differences. On her way back to Spain from Paris, Yvonne encountered

a general strike, in France, on Sunday, the day we were scheduled to leave. Just to get to the airport we were relying on two metro lines and a bus, and now the status of our flight back to Spain was up in the air (bad pun)...Overall, our experiences in Paris were wonderful, and we got a quick lesson in independence and the unexpected problems that can arise when you are your own travel agent.

Kevin, in the Czech Republic, experienced a common Czech “cab ride” that was “absolutely terrifying” on his way from the airport to his study abroad accommodations. The cab was moving “about 60 mph, cars were flying in and out of traffic, dodging trams, slamming on breaks, and gunning engines in one of the most perfect examples of organized chaos that I will ever witness.” Nicole writes about “a little scare” she encountered with the train system in Italy: “I misread the departure times, and we hopped on the wrong train! After realizing my mistake, we had to spring to our actual train.”

Similar to Nicole’s experience, Ashley accidentally “got on the bus going in the wrong direction” after grocery shopping. “Never making that mistake again,” she writes. “I ended up having to ride all the way to the end of the line and then stay on the bus until it looped back through city centre in the direction of my apartment.” Although he provides little detail of the experience, Henry runs into a similar experience “trying to get to Maihan Sports Land” which “was by far the most frustrating experience I have had in Japan...it [was] the trickiest place ever to get to on your own.” These bloggers and others provide clear examples of opportunities they had to exercise their independence and

problem-solving skills and to exhibit their ability to “approach life with a high degree of flexibility, adaptability, independent, and self confidence,” as well as to “cope effectively with ambiguous and unfamiliar situations” (Appendix A).

Language

Seven of the 11 bloggers studied abroad in non-English speaking countries, while the remaining four were in English-speaking host countries. While only three students write about their enrollment in language courses, students in both categories express language learning. This theme of learning is defined by language acquisition, learning to use and understand colloquialisms, the challenge of language barriers and overcoming them, and, occasionally, a relationship between language and culture. Another way to consider this theme is as “communication,” or the variety of ways in which students described the experience of communicating in a culture or language different from their own. Since language is defined in a broader context of communication, even a student’s description of a conversation in “broken English” might be considered as a reference to this theme.

As described in Chapter 2, language acquisition is a frequently researched study abroad effect. Studies report language competency is increased through study abroad programs in non-English speaking locations, both in immersion programs and in programs where courses are primarily taught in English (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Martinsen, et al., 2010; Kline, 1998; Wanner, 2009; Wilkinson, 2000; Wolf, 2007). The ability to speak a second language also has career applicability, since employers see this skill as beneficial to the workplace (Gutierrez, et al., 2009). Tom and Nancy were both enrolled in language courses abroad; Nancy’s program in China is intensive, meaning

that language learning is the highest priority, while Tom's program includes courses taught in English and a Spanish language class. Yvonne also writes about a Spanish language course but does not reference her language learning often. Both Tom and Nancy use their blogs as platforms to display their language learning, as well as to discuss the associated challenges with learning a second language.

Tom, more than any other blogger, frequently incorporated language into his blog by using Spanish words or phrases amidst his native English. His examples of language accomplishment include: "¡Estoy emocionado para regresar a esos vendedores muchas veces!"; "Yo pienso que si escribes todas las horas en español, y también si pienso en español, luego quizás podrás entender cuando los españoles hablan más mejor; o espero, jajaja"; and "Sevilla, voy a extrañarte." In the earlier posts in his blog, Tom expresses concern about his being able to communicate in Spanish and makes frequent references to needing to improve his language skills. In addition to enrolling in a Spanish class, Tom also signs up for the "Intercambio" program, "where an American student and a Spanish [sic] person meet up every now and then and teach each other Spanish/English [sic]." Despite his nervousness at meeting his "IC" for the first time, Tom and [his Spanish friend] "get along really well" and Tom is excited to "keep meeting up with him."

Nancy's references to language are primarily related to her struggles, accomplishments, and emotions regarding the slow process of learning Chinese. Echoing the findings of language acquisition research, Nancy expresses her motivation for studying abroad in China in a language intensive program:

Anyone will tell you that being in China and speaking and understanding Mandarin is quite different from what goes on in a Chinese class at any given

American university. The only way to really get it is to *be* in it, and my aim is to improve my Mandarin language skills by living in China for a year and practicing, practicing, practicing.

Within her first few days of arriving in China, Nancy finds that even simple tasks are “more difficult because they are different or new or simply because I cannot use English words to help me. It takes far more concentration to function in Mandarin.” In her intensive language program, Nancy agrees to a “language commitment” which permits her to speak only Mandarin between 8:00 am and 8:00 pm. Failure to comply—that is, speak English—will effect her academic grades. Nancy refers to this commitment often throughout her blog, often through examples of what she calls “creative” or “bad” Chinese. “I am learning to speak Mandarin creatively,” she writes,

...when I don’t know how to say a certain word. This happens a lot. My favorite creative combo happened when I was talking to [a friend] and trying to say ‘wheelchair’ but did not know how, so I combined the words for ‘chair’ and ‘car’ and... well, he understood my “chair-car” to mean exactly what I wanted it to mean, and we had a good laugh. Chair-car. *That’s* pretty bad. Ten points for effort? Other gems include “Big Boat” (the movie Titanic), “electricity exchange machine” (electrical converter), “no eyes person” (blind- and [my friend] gets credit for that one), and “my head + to blow” (my mind is blown).

Her candid expressions of frustration show just how dedicated Nancy is to her language commitment, even though she is

not always happy. More often than not, I’m frustrated, grasping for the right words, or feeling that everything that comes out of my mouth is so basic and

everything in my head is much more insightful and yet I cannot communicate at that level yet. But this is the learning curve- there is no other way. Maybe one day I will look back and read this and realize that yes, it does get easier. Maybe I'll be wrong- maybe it doesn't get easier. I only know that it is worth it.

Even though she is enrolled in language courses in China, Nancy also finds learning to occur outside of the classroom in unexpected places, including a weekly dance class. She is able to notice herself improving in language skills through this extracurricular activity:

In the couple of weeks that I've been going to this Latin dance class, I've noticed that my reaction time is constantly being tested and honed. My biggest challenge as a Mandarin learner is what I like to call processing time; when I hear Mandarin, there is a certain amount of time between the spoken words, when my brain registers the meaning, and when my brain formulates a reaction or response...In a dance class, comprehension speed is important. The environment is fast-paced, but I am learning to react more quickly. For example, during my first few classes, we would be in the middle of a dance combination and the teacher would say “停！” (“stop!”) and everyone else would freeze in the middle of their movement, and I would keep going... and catch on to what she said, one second later. It's not that I don't know what 停 means- it's that my reaction time was *too slow*. Gradually, my reaction time has improved in this dance class.

The ways in which Nancy describes her language learning are unique, but provide a great deal of insight into the actual learning process. Her ability to make connections between language acquisition and every day occurrences make her a particularly interesting blogger for the study of student learning abroad. Although Tom's observations

are not as extensive or in-depth as Nancy's, both students clearly demonstrate an "[active engagement] in the learning process" and the ability to "communicate effectively across cultures, preferably in a second or third language" (Appendix A).

All other bloggers, excluding Henry, made references to language, even those studying in English-speaking countries. Ellen devotes her second blog post to "Aussie slang," complete with American English translations. Natalie seems to somewhat effortlessly incorporate New Zealand phrases into her blog, sometimes without explanation. Ashley, in England, travels to non-English speaking countries and, to avoid being "the tourist who can barely speak the language of the country," she makes an effort to "know how to say yes, no, please, thank you, hello, goodbye, and the numbers up to ten" in the country's language. Alice, although not a student in the Dutch language, makes a point to describe her attempts to learn the language of her host country, the Netherlands, by talking with locals and reading newspapers.

These students are no doubt learning to "communicate effectively across cultures," which fits into Lee's (2011) findings that blogs during a study abroad semester help to contribute to a student's development of multicultural or intercultural competence. Students who write about language, even in English-speaking countries, also display an "appreciation of, and open-mindedness toward, other cultures" by seeking to understand and use the language differences.

Academics

Despite the word "study" being at the beginning of "study abroad," academics was only the sixth most commonly referenced theme of learning. The definition of academics, based on the bloggers' references, includes the academic or campus culture of

the host country, class activities including field trips, course work—sometimes even displayed on the blog itself, and the application of classroom learning to outside-the-classroom experiences. It is likely that the type of study abroad program had an influence on the ways in which students wrote about academics. For example, Nancy, participating in an intensive language immersion program through a US government-sponsored scholarship, would have more opportunity to consider her academic experience as part of her daily life, since the two are often intertwined. By contrast, Nicole's experience in Italy seems to be much more about the opportunity to travel and experience a new culture than the chance to study and learn in a different country.

The USC Academic Learning Outcomes expect students to “1. understand their academic discipline within an international context; 2. demonstrate knowledge of global issues, processes, trends and systems; and 3. [be] actively engaged in the learning process” (Appendix A). Most bloggers do not reference their major or areas of study within blog posts, and some never describe the courses they are taking abroad; few reflective posts reveal students are considering their major with a new perspective, suggesting that perhaps the internationalized understanding of an academic discipline might be better assessed after a student's return to his or her home university in the US. However, for Academic Learning Outcome 2 and 3, there is strong evidence and revealing references within students' posts.

Nancy, a political science major, often takes time to write meaningful explanations of the current political issues in China, which points toward Academic Learning Outcomes 1 and 2. In one post, she actually shares a completed assignment, “focusing on the state's role in ethnic and minority dance in China, and more specifically,

how the state has used ethnic dance as a political tool.” Tom also sees his major from a new perspective when he notices the satellite dishes on homes in an impoverished neighborhood; assessing that television might be the families’ “only way to stay connected to the world around them,” he “feel[s] good,” perhaps meaning proud, “to be a jour. [sic] major.” Understanding one’s academic discipline from a different, international perspective typically leads to clarification or redirection in career paths, as Fry, et al. (2009) discover.

Showing that she is “actively engaged in the learning process,” Ellen, whose major falls into the communications or journalism category, posts some of her assignments; one is a completed photo journalism project, and another is the first draft of a documentary press release. By participating in communications projects abroad, Ellen is able to understand her major within a new context, Academic Learning Outcome 1. Ellen also writes about her non-major courses, specifically “Introduction to Aboriginal Australia,” where she watched a “short film with Aboriginal actors.” In one of her courses, Ellen’s professor invites a former student to speak about “his experiences growing up with conflict and peace in Palestine”; she describes him as “inspirational” and posts a “sound bite” of him “responding to the question, ‘What triggered it, for you, to change from conflict to peace?’” Ellen’s account of this particular day in class reveals that she is increasing in her “knowledge of global issues” even beyond her host country (Appendix A).

Perhaps providing an explanation as to the lack of academic references among bloggers used in this study, Ellen articulates “how hard it is to study when studying abroad.” “Don’t get me wrong,” she reassures her readers, “I find my subjects

fascinating. But they are the furthest thing from my mind 99% of the time. Which is probably why my first grade didn't thrill me. So instead of sightseeing this weekend, I'm trying to bunker down and do some homework." Ashley seems to echo Ellen's sentiment, since many of her references to academics are negative or suggest that course work is an impediment to her traveling. However, Ashley, like Ellen, writes about intentionally setting aside time in order to accomplish her school work. Fry, et al. (2009) cite "life enhancement skills" as an effect of study abroad found during their study, and Ashley, Ellen, and other bloggers display an increase in time management as they learn to balance priorities while abroad.

Throughout the student blogs, bloggers display active participation in the process of learning within an academic context. Nicole finds, to her surprise, that she enjoys visiting museums around Italy as a requirement for a course, and Yvonne explains that, after taking a midterm, she can now describe, "in detail," a piece of artwork "in both English and Spanish." Nancy's frequent descriptions of her progress in learning Chinese, as well as her application of this learning outside of the classroom, show her engagement with learning. Although Kevin is an engineering major, he enrolls in a philosophy course abroad; while doing "some hardcore philosophy studying" on a weekend, he admits that "reading the works of a bunch of brainy intellectuals is a nice change from staring at a page full of math equations." And Lynne writes very animatedly about her courses, which she seems to thoroughly enjoy:

Do you remember the professor from my International Reactions to the First World War in Film and Fiction class? He is, turns out, brilliant...I've found that while other members of the class have a tendency to go overly-Freudian on

particular topics, I have a tendency to go in the opposite direction and utterly ignore symbolism. He does an exquisite job of getting them to tone it down and getting me to go a bit further with my analyses. I'm happy with all of my classes. After celebrating the completion of a term paper, Alice explains that the assignment was challenging for her since, as a visual communications major, she has not written a term paper in four years. But this challenge, of trying something new, is all part of the experience for Alice: "this is the academic experience I was looking for when I decided to come abroad. Let's hope my history prof [sic] finds photography as telling of his country as I do." These students all display the third Academic Learning Outcome by describing their interaction with their course work and course material.

Students also display adaptability and flexibility when adjusting to differences in the academic cultures of their host countries. Ashley, an English major in England, describes her first day of classes which

began with the realization that I was already behind on reading for one of my classes...I also felt incredibly underprepared for my first seminar. I simply read the book, made some notes in the margins as I went along, and moved on to my next reading for another class. Everyone else, it seemed, had read the book, read literary criticisms of the book, compared it to other novels in the course they had previously read...I'd be afraid of shrinking into the background of these seminars except I can't really do that because they are only 9-10 people and the professor is well aware of who is contributing and who is not."

This initial day of academic culture shock made her aware of the ways in which she would have to adjust to new norms. Lynne also voices her concerns about differences in the academic culture in Wales, recognizing that

things are focused so much more on analyzation [sic] that I'm concerned about hitting critical points in each class. In the US, things focus largely on memorization and regurgitation. It's miles away from that here. The lectures really are one person talking at you for an hour, and the book list is four pages long and details books that may be helpful to the course, but it's up to us to pick which ones we like. I'm ashamed to say that the frightened thought that went through my mind was something along the lines of, "Oh my God...I'm going to have to do so much *thinking* here." I know. Very embarrassing. It's not as though I prefer the American system (I'm pretty bored with it, to be honest) but I have no experience with something like what they've presented me with here.

She later reports that her courses are going well, and she has successfully adjusted to the change. Other bloggers write about similar transformations of learning how to navigate an unfamiliar academic setting while maintaining grades and completing assignments on time.

People

Although infrequent, students seemed to enjoy writing about the new friendships they made, the locals they met, or the new people they encountered. Every reference of another person was not included in the count for this theme; rather, references were counted towards this theme when students chose to write about significant or meaningful encounters with other individuals. The bloggers meet people from all over the world, not

just from their host country, and many write about how these new relationships challenged them to see a new perspective, such as Natalie's encounter with a native New Zealander. The ways in which the bloggers' references to interactions with people point to particular USC Study Abroad Learning Outcomes is difficult to narrow down, because each encounter is so individualized. Numbers 3 and 4 of the Cultural Learning Outcomes are often displayed through these accounts. However, it is possible that all Cultural and Personal Learning Outcomes are touched during students' encounters with locals, new friends, or other individuals.

Some students' interactions with new people bring about a shift in their identity, a known effect of study abroad (Dolby, 2004; Ellwood, 2011; Gesinski, et al., 2010; Savicki & Cooley, 2011). When a student encounters an individual with values or beliefs very different from their own, their own values and beliefs are challenged. When Ellen meets a Palestinian, she is inspired by his testimony and seeks to understand the context of his stories by researching his background. Henry, who writes that he enjoys meeting "a wide range of people," presumably meaning cultural differences, understands the ways in which other people can influence personality or character traits; he encourages those who, "as an individual are not the bravest person on the planet" to "hang around some of those crazy people who go on the different path that is trodden by few." Natalie spends her first several weeks in New Zealand traveling around the island and staying with a friend's father and his granddaughter. Natalie describes this man as "selfless" and "wise," and she admires him for living such a simple life that is quite different from the city life she is used to the US. While staying with her new friend, she writes that she has

...found this peace of mind that I hope to keep with me when I go back to the city and have a busier life with school and all. Living this simple life just makes sense...having too much seems to pollute us into thinking we don't have enough.

There is clarity when materialistic things don't bog us down.

When the time comes for her to leave Wanaka and head to her host city, she reveals that she “learned so much more than I expected and am so happy that I ended up there [in Wanaka].” These accounts in which bloggers’ identities are influenced or challenged by individuals they meet also point to the third Cultural Learning Outcome: “exhibit an awareness of and respect for diversity in all forms,” as well as the fourth and sixth Cultural Learning Outcome.

A surprising result of this study is that bloggers rarely, or at least not directly, point to the first Personal Learning Outcome, which specifically references students’ “relationships with others” (Appendix A). When bloggers write about meeting locals, making new friends, or developing genuine relationships, they often describe the characteristics of these individuals that they find interesting. However, these descriptions do not usually include the way in which their own characteristics—as formed by their “values, beliefs, and cultural biases”—compare to those they meet (Appendix A). In one post, Nancy describes her friendship with a Chinese student whom she calls “S”; “shes just a good friend,” Nancy writes, “and we have similar personalities. Sometimes we’re talking and I feel like I’m almost talking to an old buddy who I’ve known for a long time.” Her description of this meaningful friendship barely brushes the surface of the depth to which Personal Learning Outcome 1 refers.

Yvonne stays in a hostel during her travels and had dinner “with a lot of people from all over the world—Australia, Canada, Poland, China, several of the different states in America.” Although she describes this experience as “fun” and enjoyable to “get to know each other and talk about our travels,” she does not directly refer to the ways in which her own value system informs these new relationships. When Kevin meets an Italian, also in a hostel, they “exchange...life stories and tales of the road...his usually being much more interesting than mine. I got an insiders view into what Italy was really like...and made a new friend.” There is, perhaps, something to be learned from Kevin’s impression of his new friend’s “interesting” life, but again, this account does not directly explain the ways this new friendship was influenced by Kevin’s beliefs or values. These examples do, however, fit into Gemignani’s (2009) findings that, based on students’ perceptions, cultural understanding developed primarily from their interactions with locals or with international students and also indicate their ability to communicate across cultures, part of Cultural Learning Outcome 5 (Gemingani, 2009; Kitsantas, 2004; Lee, 2011).

Reflection & Acknowledgement of Learning

Although reflection and acknowledgement of learning are labeled separately, I have chosen to discuss them concurrently because they often coincide in the results. Many of the bloggers’ recognition of learning occur during moments of reflection; this relationship makes sense, given Kolb’s (1985) reflective observation stage of learning, during which a student considers his or her experiences from multiple perspectives—often resulting in an awareness of the learning that has occurred. Important to the theme of reflecting is the student’s ability to make meaning from experiences; the bloggers’

self-reflections emerged as a theme of learning since they often commented on the larger implications of learning and the learning process. In many ways, the instances of reflection in the sample blogs can be a culmination of the student learning that has occurred during a study abroad program.

However, many students spent only a few brief sentences reflecting on an experience or on their experience as a whole. Five students end their blogs without any sort of reflection on the past semester, two students incorporate reflection into their final posts, and four students—the USC bloggers—use at least one post to summarize and reflect on their study abroad experience.

Reflections are characterized by non-descriptive language, making sense of experiences, and consideration of meaning. In the sample blogs, reflections did not only occur at the end of the study abroad semester; in fact, many of them occurred during or amidst a description of the experience upon which a student is reflecting. Often folded into these reflections are bloggers' recognition or acknowledgment of learning. A reference was counted in the total number for acknowledgement of learning if a blogger, considered any experience a "lesson" or a "learning experience," believed that he or she had "learned," or if certain synonyms of "learn" were used—such as "understand" or "discover." Most references of learning occurred within the references of reflection, and the broader context of the entire post was considered when determining under which theme of learning the references would fall.

There is not one single Study Abroad Learning Outcome that specifically references reflection or the acknowledgement of learning because ; most of the outcomes can be seen, or even arguably enhanced, through the process of reflection. By showing

evidence that they are aware of their own learning, bloggers reveal that they are “actively engaged in the learning process” and often show their “ability to think critically” (Appendix A). Through reflections of their experiences, students point towards all three Learning Outcomes categories. The major outcomes revealed through these reflections include Cultural Learning Outcomes 2, 4, and 6, and Personal Learning Outcomes 2 and 3.

Reflections and acknowledgements of learning reveal that students experience changes in their identity or self awareness (Dolby, 2004; Gesinski, et al. 2010; Ellwood, 2011; Savicki & Cooley, 2011), multicultural competency (Gemignani, 2009; Kitsantas, 2004; Lee, 2011), increased open-mindedness (Dolby, 2004; Ellwood, 2011; Franklin, 2010; Gesinski, et al., 2010; Kolb, 2009; Lee, 2011; Picard, et al. 2009; Savicki & Cooley, 2011; Wolf, 2007), and second language acquisition (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Martinsen, et al., 2010; Kline, 1998; Wanner, 2009; Wilkinson, 2000). In many ways, these two themes of learning encompass the other themes of learning and provide further evidence for learning in each of these areas.

Henry’s blog was primarily reflective, as noted in his blog profile and as apparent in Figure 6. He describes himself as an average man, “wandering around Japan. Trying to learn their culture and lifestyle.” Then, in a shift to more abstract language, he writes, “hopefully [I can] learn more about myself and what direction I wish to take in my life, what I truly want to do. Taking each step forward, getting lost in this country and meeting such a wide range of people. Wandering around and learning all I can.” Henry explains his motivation to study abroad, and what he hopes to learn during his semester in Japan. Several posts later, he seems to appreciate “the diversity we have in America” when he

compares this cultural norm to “just see so much of one race in a single place with little to no variance in the population.” Later, he reveals that he is learning the value of money and budgeting when he asks himself the question,

"How do you have fun for cheap in Japan?" Well maybe you can, but is it really worth it? Do you want to have a pocket full of money and nothing really to say about it, or turn out your pockets out with a ridiculous grin on your face and great stories to share. Personally, I am in favor of the latter. I am in no means a rich man, but I feel that I get the most enjoyment out of each dollar I spend. Sure we all make those stupid purchases and buy crazy things that we never need. Yet I believe if we spend money doing the things we love, then who really cares.

Money comes and goes, but the memories last forever. Go out, have fun, do something stupid, take every opportunity to see the world as its meant to be.

Henry’s reflection on how he chooses to spend his money seems to be an acute response to the challenges of travel. In another reflection several posts later, Henry seems to have further considered the ways in which money restricts him, or perhaps does not, in terms of his travels and he appears to value spontaneity. “I feel that in life,” he writes,

we have many guidelines that we choose to live by. How much we do, how much we spend, when we decide to do anything is based on some type of rule set. Now I am all in favor of having rules to abide by, it [sic] the basis for our society. My only problem with this is when it prevents you from experiencing all you can from life. Taking every opportunity available to expand your horizon, to see more of the world, and maybe accomplish a goal you have long held. Sometimes we have to accept that the future cannot be manipulated to place us in the ideal

position, not everything can be predicted and equated for and we must accept that. I say this because it is really easy to fall into a routine, a place of security where you never attempt to step out of the track grooved in by your repeated cycle. Being spontaneous is one of the best things you can ever learn.

These reflections reveal Henry's desire to accomplish Personal Learning Outcomes 2 and 3 and Cultural Learning Outcome 2. In addition, he shows evidence of intellectual development (McKeown, 2009; Lee, 2011) and increased self-awareness. Since he chooses to write abstract reflections in a voice that is directed toward future study abroad participants, Henry's posts and references are often sometimes difficult to categorize across the other themes. Although he does not write about his experiences in the same way the other bloggers choose to, his blog can still be considered as revealing evidence of student learning, as evidenced by the previous examples.

Although all students include reflective references throughout their blogs, only the four USC bloggers post a final reflection summarizing their experiences and, sometimes, exposing the areas in which they recognize growth within themselves. Since USC encourages its bloggers to post a reflection at the end of the study abroad term, and since the USC bloggers were the only students who did so, there is an implication that students will not use their blogs for reflection of longitudinal learning unless prompted.

Alice's final post is particularly memorable, since she takes readers through the various phases of culture shock that she remembers having experienced—and includes a graph for visual reference. Despite considering herself “a pretty experience traveler with over 15 countries and all 50 states under my belt,” she learns that she “was no exemption from this phenomenon [of culture shock].” With a subtle tone of advice-giving, Alice

describes the adjustments, challenges, and anxiety that she experienced throughout the semester. For example, “initial adjustment,” she explains, “happened when I finally Skyped with my parents, committed to a morning routine, and investing in a few pretty great people.” Several phases later, she describes “Acceptance integration” which

happens seamlessly – it [sic] extremely likely that you won’t even notice it.

You’ve developed relationships with people that you can trust, you have a spot where you grab a coffee after class, and you know just where to go or what to do to destress – or celebrate! Your life abroad becomes...fluid...When you arrived you might have thought that this foreign place could be home away from home and until you have to say goodbye, you won’t realize that it has.

She appears to experience the most learning and growth in a phase that she calls “mental isolation.” It is during this period of transition from what is comfortable to one that is inane that Alice discovers “one of the most important lessons I learned from the last six months...Be aware that your time is short,” she warns her readers, “and it is still passing. Chin up in the rough times and in a response to the those [sic] times, dig deeper into exploring the environment you’ve chosen to open yourself up to.” In the end, Alice recognizes that “this opportunity changes you,” and her own change is apparent through this unique and thoughtful post of learning and reflection.

In one of her final reflections, Nicole reveals evidence of profound learning, largely in the area of her career goals:

The end of this great experience also means starting to focus on the ‘real world’ and life after college. I will be graduating in May (knock on wood). I have to start applying to graduate school, take the dreadful GRE, and find a job. I’m nervous to

make those big steps. Truthfully, living the fairy tale life in [Italy] seems like a lot more fun. I am excited, though. I feel like I am better prepared for the next steps because I've studied abroad...my time abroad has been the best learning experience in my entire life.

Perhaps in an effort to exhibit this learning, Nicole spends her next post giving advice to future study abroad participants. Much of her advice is anecdotal, such as her plea to females to leave the high heels at home, but her admittance of homesickness and explaining how she worked through this challenge is particularly interesting. She explains that admitting her homesickness was the first step to dealing with it; only then was she able to learn that "there are so many great things about studying abroad and it is OK to miss home while experience new and exciting adventures." In her final blog post, Nicole articulates the ways in which she feels she has changed as an individual, changes that poignantly reflect several known study abroad effects:

...there is so much I already miss about Florence. I immediately tasted the difference in freshness in the fruit and vegetables. My body also misses all the daily walking in Florence and I hate driving! Studying abroad has been the best experience of my life for so many reasons. It was not always easy, but in those moments I learned the most about myself. I feel as if I've matured and changed for the better...and I owe it all to [host city]. I knew studying abroad would provide me with the opportunity to travel, meet new people, and experience a different culture. I never knew it would have such an impact on the way I view myself and others.

Her change in identity and self-awareness is the most striking aspect of this reflection. Although she does not provide further explanation as to how, precisely, the view of herself has changed or what she has learned about herself, her recognition of this personal growth is profound and provides strong evidence for multiple Study Abroad Learning Outcomes and various known study abroad effects, most obviously a shift in identity (Dolby, 2004; Ellwood, 2011; Gesinski, et al., 2010; Savicki & Cooley, 2011).

Repeatedly throughout each blog in this study, students recall moments of learning, times in which they challenged themselves or overcame unexpected challenges, the impactful and lasting friendships they have developed, the language skills they have developed, the cultural aspects they will most miss, and the pieces of their own US culture that they have now learned to appreciate or not take for granted. Even when not prompted, as the USC bloggers were at the end of their term, students reflected at various times during the semester on a variety of experiences. Although references to reflection were considered a theme of learning in this study, they may also be seen as a primary way through which learning is revealed, since it is in these moments of contemplation that students consider their experiences from a variety of perspectives (Kolb, 1985).

Summary

As these results reveal, students' blogs were rich with learning—from trying new foods to navigating transportation to documenting the language acquisition process. Most bloggers wrote primarily about the cultural learning experiences they encountered, but eight other themes of learning were also prevalent throughout the sample blogs. Students also chose to write about learning through food, travel, transportation, people, language, reflection, and acknowledgement of learning. Each blog and blogger is unique, and yet

clear themes and evidence for the blog as a means through which to understand student learning emerged through the writings of all eleven students.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Results

This study allowed for the analysis of student learning as it occurred and effectively captured organic accounts of the lived study abroad experience. Blogs provide a way to understand what students learn as the study abroad journey is happening rather than through a post-study abroad evaluation, which asks students to recall those learning moments from weeks or months before. The purpose of this study was to understand how students use blogs during a study abroad semester. The questions I sought to answer through my research are:

1. What do study abroad participants choose to write about in their blogs while they are studying abroad?
2. Do these various stories document the known effects of study abroad, and if so, how?
3. How is student learning—cultural, personal, and academic—evident in the study abroad blog, if at all?

Through a careful coding and analysis of 11 study abroad blogs written by students at the University of South Carolina, an understanding of the proven effects of study abroad, and a juxtaposition of students' references to learning with the USC Study Abroad Learning Outcomes, answers to these questions were found and the results were explained in Chapter IV.

My first research question was answered by close readings of each blog, which allowed common themes or references to surface organically. After reading each blog twice for accuracy, nine themes of learning—that is, aspects of the study abroad experience that students associated with some type of change, growth, experience, or learning—emerged. Since this question sought to determine what students were choosing to write in their blogs, experiences were given significance if students chose to write about them. However, not all experiences carried the same weight of significance, and it was those that continuously showed evidence of learning, as defined by Kolb (1985) that created the nine themes. These themes of learning were culture, food, travel, transportation, language, academics, people, reflection, and acknowledgement of learning. Many bloggers wrote just as much if not more about their travels outside of their host location than on every day life within their host location. During posts about travel, however, students continued to reference all themes of learning, suggesting that the independent and group travel during a study abroad program is perhaps just as valuable as the study abroad program itself. Bloggers also wrote in various ways about budgeting money abroad, accommodations, dealing with homesickness, and getting involved in the host community. These additional themes did not occur across the majority of blogs, and were not largely associated with student learning as a whole.

These nine themes of learning and the ways in which bloggers chose to write about them were then analyzed for comparison with known study abroad effects. While many effects of study abroad exist and have been examined, the areas I focused on in this study include: a shift in identity or self-awareness, multicultural competence, intellectual development, professional applicability, language acquisition, and life enhancement.

These effects were the most apparent throughout blogger references, specifically within the nine themes of learning. Table 1 shows the way in which these known effects were revealed across the themes of learning. Professional Applicability appeared to have the most relevance in bloggers' references to themes of learning, with multicultural competence the second most applicable. Other effects, such as shifting in identity, language acquisition, and life enhancement were occasionally related to the themes about which bloggers chose to write.

In order to determine the ways in which student learning was evident in the blogs, USC's Study Abroad Learning Outcomes were compared to the nine themes of learning and the ways in which bloggers referenced them. These Learning Outcomes are based around the intended and understood effects of study abroad, so they provided an additional lens through which to analyze student learning as described in a blog written during a study abroad program. All three categories of learning outcomes were apparent in references, and evidence for nearly each individual learning outcome could be found in the student blogs. The two learning outcomes which were most evident throughout the nine themes of learning both fell under the Cultural category: 4: "display an understanding of values, beliefs, traditions, and perspectives different from their own" and 6: "demonstrate an appreciation of, and open-mindedness toward, other cultures." Cultural Learning Outcome 5—"communicate effectively across culture, preferably in a second or third language"—along with Personal Learning Outcomes 2 and 3—"able to approach life with a high degree of flexibility, adaptability, independence, and self confidence" and "demonstrate the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and

cope effectively with ambiguous and unfamiliar situations”—were the second most common across the themes in student blogs.

An unexpected result of this study was the lack of references that related to the first Personal Learning Outcome: “demonstrate an understanding of how their own values, beliefs, and cultural biases influence their relationships with others.” Although bloggers write about meeting locals, making new friends, and interacting with people, none of these references displayed this particular learning outcome. This is not to suggest that the outcome was not achieved, but rather that students did not see the experience as a significant aspect about which to write.

Since USC featured bloggers as well as independent bloggers were used in this study, a result outside of the research questions was discovered. Only USC bloggers, who were prompted by the Study Abroad Office to write a reflection post at the end of the study abroad program, actually produced a final post that summarized, reflected, and considered the study abroad semester as a whole. These reflective posts written by the four USC students contained a great deal of learning evidence and offered perhaps the greatest insights into the individual student’s experience. Since independent bloggers did not write reflective posts, and students may not reflect if they are not required or prompted to do so, it became more difficult to determine their perception of learning as it occurred over the semester.

Overall, bloggers were found to be highly aware of the transformative experiences they encountered, and their learning was consistent with both the known study abroad effects and USC’s Study Abroad Learning Outcomes. Although each blog was individual, unique, and different, as were the bloggers who wrote them, common

elements and themes that reflected similar areas of growth and learning became clear throughout the study. That students most commonly used their blogs to describe cultural learning was not surprising; however, the lack of reflection and acknowledgement of learning suggest that bloggers did not utilize blogs as a way to assess their own learning and that perhaps some amount of guidance or prompting should be used to encourage students to consider their experience through the process of reflection.

Conclusions

The reading and analysis of blogs allowed student learning as it occurs during study abroad to be understood within the context of the student experience and the holistic study abroad term. Although every blog used in this study was written by a separate, individual blogger, and despite these bloggers being enrolled in study abroad programs across 10 different countries and over the span of four different semesters, there still emerged commonalities across all 11 blogs. This study does not address the motivation of bloggers, but the nine references of learning that occurred across nearly all blogs—Henry was sometimes the exception to these themes—suggest that there are certain experiences during a study abroad semester which most students find to be significant and worth sharing. Studies conducted on the effects of study abroad reflect this fact, that students show commonalities across learning during this highly transformative experience, but this study is unique in that it finds these common areas of learning through the choices students make about what to share during the experience itself (Dolby, 2004; Franklin, 2010; Fry, et al., 2009; Gesinski, et al., 2010; Ellwood, 2011; Kitsantas, 2004; McKeown, 2009; Lee, 2011; Savicki & Cooley, 2011, Wolf, 2007).

Many experiences that students wrote about and associated with learning may seem trivial to the student by the end of the program, and thus probably not the same experiences a student would share in a post-study abroad assessment. For example, Nicole calls study abroad “the best experience of my life” and cites a change in the way she views herself; but she may not consider that her attempts to cook, despite this skill not “run[ning] in the family,” show a development in independence and may have led her to this self proclaimed shift in identity (Fry, et al., 2009). Post-study abroad assessments ask students to recall examples or stories that relate to specific questions, and fail to capture this learning during the crux of the experience.

All four of the USC bloggers used in this study chose to write a reflective post at the end of the study abroad term. These students were given a prompt and a reminder by USC Study Abroad staff to reflect on their experiences. In contrast, none of the independent bloggers included a post at the end of the study abroad term in which they reflected on their experiences. This result is consistent with the findings of Sharma (2010), who found that student bloggers who were given writing guidelines tended to be more reflective than those who were not directed through the writing process. Although both types of study abroad bloggers in my study had instances of reflection throughout their blogs, perhaps these instances would have been more frequent had bloggers received suggestions about topics to consider in their posts. Since reflection is a way that students both achieve and process learning (Kolb, 1985), then student learning may be increased during study abroad if given prompts to reflect on the experience through a blog.

As described in Chapter 2, research prior to this study tends to assess the student study abroad experience upon return to the US. This study is unique in its approach to analyze the student experience during the study abroad program. Most previous research also used guided questions to achieve certain results or to measure certain outcomes; this study instead relies on the areas and experiences that students deem significant, and thus choose to share in writing on a public blog. This organic method of collecting information about student learning based on what the students decide to write about enabled the study abroad experience to be described and evaluated by the study abroad students themselves, rather than through a directed method which only allows students to respond to particular aspects that the researcher has reasoned significant.

Bloggers' accounts of their experiences clearly show evidence of various known effects of study abroad. That students' blog posts reflect major effects such as shifts in identity, multicultural competence, professional applicability, and language acquisition helps to validate the student blog as a potential tool for assessing the effects of study abroad. Unlike in post-assessment surveys, blogs reveal the process that students go through in order to arrive at these known effects. Nancy, who writes of her progress in her study of Mandarin Chinese, no doubt achieves the known effect of language acquisition. But a post-assessment study might not also reveal that much of this learning had occurred during a Latin dance class, through personal conversations with the owners of a Korean restaurant, or through days and days of stumbling over "creative" Chinese in order to arrive at the proper and correct words or phrases.

Based on USC's Study Abroad Learning Outcomes, student learning is apparent all throughout the study abroad blog. Bloggers touched on nearly every learning outcome,

with an unsurprising emphasis on the cultural category. When students write about the learning they are experiencing of their own prompting, rather than as a result of a directed question, it provides explanation for the ways in which learning outcomes are being achieved.

Ultimately, blogs are a way for students to share their study abroad experiences with whomever they would like—the general public, their parents, future study abroad students. Blogs also give these students a platform from which to decide which aspects of their experiences are the most significant or important. Understanding what students choose to write on a study abroad blog and how these choices compare to what is already known about study abroad reveals that student learning occurs from this experience in ways too complex to be fully captured in a post-program method. Rather than looking for a specific effect that study abroad has on students, it may be more beneficial to let the students reveal the effects that study abroad has on them as these effects are actively taking place.

Recommendations for Further Research

As the researcher, I chose to focus on a student population that was available to me through my work at the University of South Carolina. Only 11 blogs were included in this study because, after narrowing down the featured USC bloggers and those who volunteered their blogs, only 11 fit into my articulated criteria. While these 11 bloggers certainly revealed answers to my research questions, a similar study using a larger sample from various universities would allow for greater external validity (Fry, et al., 2009; Sutton & Rubin, 2004). In addition, all bloggers participated in semester-long study abroad programs. Many studies intentionally select students who have been enrolled in

differing types of education abroad programs; this diverse sample allows for comparison between program types (Gemignani, 2009). Repeating this study with a larger sample size of bloggers who are completing or have completed different types of education abroad programs may reveal interesting discrepancies between the ways in which students document or share their international experiences. The study could also be repeated with students who studied abroad in underdeveloped or non-traditional locations, since non-traditional locations were not well represented with this sample. Countries that are non-industrialized may have limited internet access, which could provide an interesting area of challenge for students who blog while abroad. In addition, undeveloped countries likely have cultures of learning that greatly differ from those of developed countries, and these differences may be seen through the writings of students who are studying abroad in these locations.

Gender and ethnicity were also not considered in the selection of my sample; however, there is a large gap in study abroad participation between the female and male populations and between majority and minority populations. Additional research that considers the ways in which these populations use blogs differently during a study abroad program would provide further insight into understanding student learning through blogs.

For the purposes of my research and due to the nature of the convenience sample, it was beneficial and valid to use USC's Study Abroad Learning Outcomes as a measure of learning. An analysis of the same 11 blogs with a separate set of learning outcomes may produce very different results. In the GLOSSARI Project, Sutton & Rubin (2004) assess study abroad learning outcomes identified by the Georgia university system. My study could be used as an additional assessment to these learning outcomes. While this

study's focus was not on the effectiveness of learning outcomes, there are certain implications in the study's conclusions that may suggest the degree to which the learning outcomes are achievable. Conducting a similar study that uses multiple sets of learning outcomes from various universities, or using previously researched outcomes such as those in the Georgia university system, may reveal the outcomes that students choose to write about most often.

My research did not account for differences in blogger motivation on the larger research outcomes; however, the sample did include independent bloggers as well as USC featured bloggers. Although both types of bloggers may have had some similar motivations for writing a blog while abroad, USC bloggers' motivations would have been additionally affected by the signed contract stating their commitment to blog for USC and their understanding that their blog may be used as a reference to potential or future study abroad participants. Former studies have investigated the different factors that motivate bloggers to write, but none have been specific to study abroad bloggers (Hollenbaugh, 2011; Huang, et al., 2007; Wang, et al., 2012). In order to understand the motivation of the bloggers, interviews or focus groups would need to be conducted. The timeline of this study did not allow for this additional area to be explored, but further research may consider taking the motivation of bloggers into account in order to determine the ways in which different motivations affect the choices that study abroad bloggers make about what to write and share.

All blogs used in this study included photos, and many incorporated videos into posts. However, as explained in Chapter 3, these photos and videos were not analyzed or considered in the references to learning. The visual analysis of photos and videos in terms

of student learning is another area of research entirely, and one that is thick with potential. Certainly, the photos and videos that students choose to post complement the words they choose to write. These visual accounts may also show learning in a different or more in depth way than words. Further investigation into how students use videos and photos in their blogs to process or increase their learning is necessary for this particular research area. As digital photography and videography become more and more accessible through small cameras and mobile phones, these visual sources will likely become increasingly prevalent. Eventually, written blogs may even be replaced by video blogs, or “vlogs” as they are sometimes called. Learning how students use these technological advances for their learning during study abroad will be necessary as these mediums increase in popularity.

When my research for this study was already underway, Vande Berg, Paige, and Lou (2012) released a new book about student learning during education abroad programs that challenges what previous studies have found in regards to some of the known effects I have referenced throughout. I was unable to include their investigation in my study, but the application of Kolb’s (1985) definition of experiential learning to study abroad takes an important role in the book, as it has in my study. Vande Berg, et al. (2012) also explore the areas in which intervention is necessary in study abroad in order for the desired student learning to occur. Given this new research, conducting a study on bloggers within these programs which utilize learning intervention techniques would be useful, in order to see if students document their learning differently under the circumstances of intervention.

Conclusion of Study

This study offered valuable insight into the world of the study abroad student. Through the public personal accounts of students' experiences, conclusions were drawn about the ways in which blogs are utilized during a study abroad program. Despite each blogger being starkly different from the next, themes emerged across all 11 blogs that suggested these individual students found meaning in similar ways and through similar experiences. With only a narrow sample of students from one university, there is much potential for future and further research. This study represents only a small implication of a much larger area of research. As study abroad participation in the US increases and more blogs are created, international educators will need to find a way to harness this valuable information on study abroad blogs. Although also useful for marketing programs and looking back over experiences, the study abroad blog also reveals real and important data about the student learning that occurs during these programs. This small study should serve as an indicator to those in the international education community that these blogs are important sources of information, and these bloggers are valuable examples of student learning as it occurs during study abroad.

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APPENDIX A
University of South Carolina Study Abroad Learning Outcomes*

Mission Statement

The mission of the University of South Carolina Study Abroad Office is to enhance our students' academic, personal, and cultural learning through the overseas experience. In support of this mission, the Study Abroad Office has adopted the following learning outcomes.

Study Abroad Learning Outcomes

Globally competent students graduating from the University of South Carolina, as a result of their overseas experiences:

Academic:

1. Understand their academic discipline within an international context.
2. Demonstrate knowledge of global issues, processes, trends and systems.
3. Are actively engaged in the learning process.

Cultural:

1. Have developed a profound understanding and appreciation of their own culture.
2. Actively seek out diverse, challenging experiences.
3. Exhibit an awareness of and respect for diversity in all forms.
4. Display an understanding of values, beliefs, traditions, and perspectives different from their own.
5. Communicate effectively across cultures, preferably in a second or third language.
6. Demonstrate an appreciation of, and open-mindedness toward, other cultures.

Personal:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of how their own values, beliefs, and cultural biases influence their relationships with others.
2. Are able to approach life with a high degree of flexibility, adaptability, independence, and self confidence.
3. Demonstrate the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and cope effectively with ambiguous and unfamiliar situations.
4. Have explored, examined, and strengthened career goals.
5. Draw upon diverse cultural frames of reference in daily life.

*Researcher's note: This document has been slightly modified from its original form. The addition of numbers to each learning outcome allowed for easier reference to individual outcomes within the text.

APPENDIX B
IRB Exemption Approval

November 1, 2012
Ms. Leslie Pitman
College of Education
Educational Studies
Wardlaw
Columbia, SC 29208

Re: Pro00020508

Study Title: The Student Travel Writer: Study Abroad Learning Outcomes as Revealed Through Student Blogs

Dear Ms. Pitman:

In accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), the referenced study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on 10/18/2012. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, you must inform this office of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the USC Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, please contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,
Thomas A. Coggins
Director

cc: Christian Anderson

APPENDIX C

Listerv email text to study abroad participants and returnees (independent bloggers)

Subject: Did You Blog While You Were Studying Abroad?

The Graduate Assistant in the Study Abroad Office, Leslie, is currently conducting research for her Master's Thesis on study abroad blogs - *and she needs your help!*

If you meet the following criteria, you may be eligible to submit your blog for this research project:

- Studied abroad for one semester
- Studied during: Spring 2011, Fall 2011, Spring 2012, OR Fall 2012
- Kept a written blog while abroad
- Blog is publicly available online

If you are interested in submitting your blog to be included in this research study, please contact Leslie at pitmanL@mailbox.sc.edu *as soon as possible*. Once you express interest, Leslie will contact you with more information, including a consent form. Interviews may be requested; please indicate in your interest email whether you would be willing to participate in an interview.

APPENDIX D
Follow-up email sent to voluntary participants

Dear [Name of Student],

Thank you for submitting your blog for my thesis research! I am currently a Masters of Education student in the Higher Education & Student Affairs program at the University of South Carolina. As part of my requirements for this program, I will be completing a Master's Thesis. Since my interests are in the field of international education, I decided to focus on that area for my research.

My thesis will be analyzing study abroad blogs in order to find evidence of student learning outcomes (as outlined by the USC Study Abroad Office). As a study abroad returnee and a blogger myself, I find these two experiences to be complementary; and I want to discover the relationship between the learning that occurs during study abroad and the process of writing about this learning.

Since you have voluntarily submitted your blog to be included in my research, I will be carefully reading it to draw out themes, patterns, and inconsistencies. I will be reading through 20 blogs in total, 10 from returnees and 10 from students who are currently abroad.

Your name will not be published in my research. I will assign a pseudonym to each blogger to protect your privacy. I will not include links to your blog in any publication of my thesis; however, screen shots may be necessary for visual aid.

If you have any questions at all, please do not hesitate to ask. Remember that this is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from participation at any point. Your blog may not be included in the research; since I am limiting my sample size to 20, I may not be able to use all blogs that are submitted.

After reading this information, if you are still willing to participate in my study, then please reply to this email with a link to your blog.

I am excited to work with you, and am grateful for your interest in my research. Thank you for considering being a part of this study, and I look forward to reading about your experiences abroad.

Sincerely,
Leslie Pitman
Conductor of Research

APPENDIX E
Blogger Solicitation Email (USC bloggers)

I am writing today with a special request for you to share your study abroad experience with the world! An advisor in the Study Abroad Office specifically recommended that I contact you personally about blogging for our office.

Blogs are a great way to not only show the rest of the university community what studying abroad is all about, but to also highlight the amazing experiences you are having abroad. Blogs are a great resource for other USC students interested in study abroad, as they can read your posts and gain a better understanding of what it is like to study abroad.

A blog is also a great way to keep all of your friends and family posted while you're gone, and it also provides you with a "journal" of your study abroad experiences to look back on after you come back. Additionally, this blogging project can count as your service project for the Carolina Global Study Scholarship.

Please respond to this email if you are interested in blogging for the USC study abroad Office AND you meet all of the following requirements:

- You will have regular (or at least fairly regular) access to the internet while abroad
- You are willing to upload photos of your experience on your blog
- You are willing to post on your blog twice a week while abroad

I will respond as soon as I can with further instructions. Your blog will be featured on the USC Study Abroad website. The USC Study Abroad Office is now blogging through Tumblr in order to give students more freedom in their blogging while still being an official USC Study Abroad blogger. To check out what some of our past bloggers have done on our website, go to www.studyabroad.sc.edu/blogs.

Have a great experience abroad and I hope to hear from you!

Best regards,
[Study Abroad Office Staff Member]

APPENDIX F
Blogger Follow-Up Email (USC bloggers)

Dear students,

Thanks for your reply! We would love to have you blog for the USC Study Abroad Office.

- Please review the attached blogger contract and reply to this email stating that you agree to the contract, and include the timeframe that you will be blogging (with dates that include 1-2 weeks before you depart and 1-2 weeks after you return to the U.S.).
 - The most important things to consider are appropriateness of posts & content as well as the guidelines on how often we expect students to blog.
 - TIP: Photos are good! It's always more visually appealing to break up your text with some photos.
- Please include a digital photo in your email (a recent one that is clear, fairly close-up, and suitable for the study abroad website – one of you overseas or traveling would be perfect if available), along with answers to the following questions (one to two sentences max for each question):
 - STATS: Major/minor, class standing, location, term abroad (summer 2011, fall 2011, academic year 2011/2012)
 - GOALS: What are your goals/what are you most excited about regarding your study abroad program?
 - MOTIVATION: What made you decide to study abroad?
 - PREVIOUS OVERSEAS TRAVEL: What past overseas travel (if any) have you done?
 - Any other information you would like to include on your blog profile?
- We will be in touch within the next week or two with instructions on how to get started with your blog. I need to create each of your blog pages through Tumblr, and I will follow up with instructions once those are ready. In the meantime, please check out the following link for ideas and details from our current bloggers -
http://studyabroad.sc.edu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=328&Itemid=988.

We are excited to follow your adventures abroad this spring! Thanks again and let me know if you have any questions/concerns in the meantime.

Thanks and I look forward to hearing from you!

[Study Abroad Office Staff Member]

APPENDIX G
Blogging Contract and Guidelines (USC bloggers)

OVERSEAS CORRESPONDENTS

Congratulations for being chosen as an Overseas Correspondent! As an Overseas Correspondent, you will have the unique opportunity to share your experiences abroad with other USC students, faculty, staff, family members, and others across the globe! As a representative of the University of South Carolina, it is important that you understand your position as a responsible blogger.

The Basics:

- ☐ Posts should be oriented around the excitement of your experience abroad – the new places you’re going, the things you’re seeing, the people you’re meeting, the classes you’re taking, the things you’re learning, the cultural differences you’re encountering, the challenges you’ve faced and how you resolved them, etc.
- ☐ Discuss your daily activities, studies, adventures and thoughts. Think about all things you were curious about as a student preparing to go abroad – now that you are living the experience, share that information with others.
- ☐ Our hopes are that your posts and photos will connect with other USC students at home to get them excited about the possibilities of studying abroad.
- ☐ Allow your personality to be expressed through your posts and photos.
- ☐ Post at least once every seven days – more often is great!
- ☐ Include photos as often as possible – a couple photos each week of the various places you’ve visited, things you’ve experienced, your new home-away-from-home, etc.
- ☐ You are expected to start your blog 1-2 weeks before you begin your program abroad and continue to post 2-3 weeks after you return from abroad.

Guidelines:

- ☐ Any slanderous material will result in an automatic dismissal as an Overseas Correspondent.
- ☐ The USC Study Abroad Office Staff reserves the right to end our blogging relationship at our discretion at any time.
- ☐ Be careful not to divulge certain personal information about yourself or others – your exact address, date of birth, or any other personally identifiable information.
- ☐ Be careful not to divulge information about professors, staff, or other students without their knowledge and consent.
- ☐ Do not post any material that reflects irresponsible behavior – “I got trashed last night at a party!” is not appropriate.

- ☐ Do not post inappropriate content such as expletives, prejudices, sexually explicit content or photos, purposefully inaccurate content, or offensive language and images.
- ☐ You are the only person that is allowed to post on your blog. Do not give anyone your login information or allow anyone to update your blog for you.

Content:

- ☐ As an Overseas Correspondent, you will have primary editing rights to your blog. However, if the Study Abroad Office Staff determines that any of your posts or photos do not comply with the above guidelines, they may be deleted by the USC Study Abroad Office and/or you will be asked to make necessary edits in order to avoid being excluded from any further blogging.
- ☐ Keep in mind that your parents, siblings, roommates, future employers, prospective USC students and their parents, alumni, your professors and college administrators will all have access to read your blog, so do not post any material you would not want them to see.
- ☐ Anyone reading your blog will be allowed to post comments to your entries. These comments are moderated by the Study Abroad Office blog administrator, therefore only appropriate comments are posted for the public to see. This is to minimize spam comments and inappropriate material that is out of the blogger's control. We strongly encourage bloggers to respond to comments.

Content Release:

- ☐ Text and photos from your blog may be used by the Study Abroad Office for promotional purposes in a variety of mediums including but not limited to broadcast, print, and Internet.
- ☐ The contents of your blog may be used by the Study Abroad Office for possible research purposes in the future; however your name and likeness will not be disclosed in any manner.

Blogger Agreement:

I have read and agree to all of the guidelines set forth above.

I agree to begin blogging on _____ and to end blogging on _____.

Student Signature

Date

Study Abroad Office Staff

Date