

Prioritizing the Experience: Quickstart Language Study

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The idea for Quickstart language programs came about through an **initiative** that began perhaps 10 or 12 years ago when the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures started pushing a “languages-across-the-curriculum” movement. We believed that a lot of effort from students and faculty alike – learning another language for the second language requirement – was isolated from the rest of the College’s curricular projects. We wanted to expand the use of languages other than English across the curriculum. Ideas like history courses taught in French, Women’s Studies courses taught in Spanish and perhaps even an Organic Chemistry course taught in German were pretty summarily shot down for a lack of faculty interest mainly due to the investment of time required by a faculty member to gain the fluency required to teach a course in a language other than English. We tossed around some other ideas about ways to integrate languages into the curriculum. **The Integrated International Studies major was born.** Students complete a general core course – **Introduction to Globalization**, choose a **geopolitical area of concentration** in which they must demonstrate an **intermediate language**

level, show the ability to navigate in a context where that language is spoken (usually a study abroad program) and complete three **Q courses**.

These Q courses are “regular” courses in the student’s chosen field of concentration however they have an important language component – students must somehow incorporate a substantial amount of their chosen target language into their regular course work. This is a negotiated between student and instructor. Many times the negotiations end with an agreement that, say, half of the student’s sources in major term paper are in a language other than English. Students integrate their language skills and cultural knowledge into their International Studies major. The major remains very popular with students at Knox. Most of this integration however takes place at the junior and senior level. What about first year and sophomore students? **How do we get students, from the very beginning of their college careers, to hit the ground running with an integration of language skills and cultural knowledge in a meaningful and experiential way? Quickstart was born.**

Quickstart is a two-term introductory level language course. Students travel with their instructor for two weeks during the break between the two terms to an area where the target language is spoken. There have been Quickstart classes offered with trips to Germany, France, Mexico, Peru, the Dominican Republic and the island of Puerto Rico. In listening to many of the presentations given yesterday and today, it would seem that many study

abroad experiences are seen as supplementary to the student's experience on campus. The abroad experience supplements **learning done on campus – it is a value added activity**. In some ways the Quickstart experience turns that supplement idea on its head.

In the Quickstart courses offered at Knox, the abroad experience is the fundamental experience and the learning and coursework that precedes the trip is **intentional. The coursework is specifically meant to energize, enrich and teach students how to learn experientially**. Students are well-prepared – both linguistically and contextually - to take full advantage of the opportunities for learning in the context presented abroad with a depth of understanding not afforded the casual traveler or in the conventional language classroom.

Study abroad pre-departure orientation meetings attempt to prepare students, but these three or four meetings or workshops cannot compare to ten weeks of pre-departure area and language study with the expressed goal of creating a contextualized experience prior to the Quickstart trip.

After this experience abroad, the Quickstart course continues for another 10 weeks serving as an extensive debriefing of the trip. **A structured reflective experience that gives students the time and the appropriate context – a group that has shared a trip abroad – to mull over their experiences, to capture and to emphasize moments of revelation, a**

time to think creatively and profoundly about their collective experience.

Keeping in mind that enriching the experience abroad is the priority of the Quickstart courses, it became clear that we had to **prioritize certain language topics and types of vocabulary for our beginning language students.**

First contact with the culture in question would be immigration and customs. What sorts of linguistic forms and vocabulary would be necessary for a more than awkward fumbling experience at the gateway to the students' experience abroad? Greetings and farewells, and concepts of formal and informal pronoun usage for encounters with entry officials, dates of arrival and departure, numbers for passports and length of stay, the what things are vs. where things are– the infamous “ser/estar” dichotomy. Already we're off to topics common to introductory language courses yet contextualized in useful way. Prioritizing the study experience abroad produces a motivation in the pre-trip classroom that is practical, dynamic and meaningful.

Auditioning the myriad experiences that the students would encounter, step by step, from immigration, to taking subways to the hotel and checking in, exchanging money, ordering food, and on and on aids in creating a confidence that is evident during the trip portion of the course. The students learn to become comfortable yet informed travelers before ever hitting foreign soil. Our Quickstart courses endeavor to use only **public transportation** for travel for two reasons. One is simply, again, to train

students to be good travelers and able to navigate with confidence while in a foreign context. The other speaks to what groups of travelers many times experience – isolation from their surroundings. We want students to be out and about in public, buying bus tickets, sitting on hot subways, being aware of their surroundings, seeing, smelling, touching life as it occurs. **We want the students to learn experientially, actively rather than passively watching the world go by** through the windows of private transportation.

In order for the students to further take charge of their time abroad, one of the most rewarding exercises in the Quickstart courses involves making full use of the technology that is available at all of our colleges and universities. **The final project of the pre-trip course is to create a web page in the target language.** Each student is assigned a day's worth of trip activities to research. For example, one student's day might include finding out how to get to Teotihuacán on public transportation and then research Mexico's "birthplace of the gods" itself. The goals are various with this assignment. One is to get students out surfing the web in the target language. This kind of skimming over electronic pages of text and pictures not only produces a familiarity with being surrounded by the target language, perhaps only in a virtual way, but becoming accustomed to definitely not understanding everything around them while traveling. A second goal is to familiarize the students with what they will be seeing and through the research process necessary for creating these pages gain quite a bit of factual knowledge going into the actual experience. The students

are expected to present these pages to their classmates orally at the end of the term. By divvying up the responsibilities to all members of the class and sharing their knowledge with their colleagues, a certain camaraderie and collective sense of purpose begins to develop in the classroom. We become a community of learners.

The excitement is palpable when the students finally stand in front of say the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacán as mentioned before and one of their classmates, the classmate that did research about the site, produced a web page and presented it to the class, **becomes their guide yet again**, in situ.

Another activity included in the trip requires keeping a journal. A notebook of sorts with dated pages is handed out at the airport. Everyday there are two or three questions that they must specifically answer – things like: Contemplate and write about the statue of Coatlicue – The Goddess of Motherhood and Life - in the National Museum of Anthropology. There are empty sheets of graph paper for mapping out the Zócalo – Mexico City's main plaza. There are also blank sheets for more personal record keeping of purchases, what they ate and other perhaps more special memories. Copies of the student's web pages are also placed in the journals for reference. The group also documents the trip using not only their own cameras but everyday's activities are taped with the College's "official" video camera that a different student has responsibility for everyday. The journals, pictures and videotape become crucial for the post-trip portion of the course.

What makes this course different than say a high school trip to Europe is the chance to debrief as a group about a collective experience. While the group did travel together, everyone's eyes saw different details; everyone's reaction to the impoverished children begging before the gold inlayed altar of a cathedral was different. We need to talk about that. The Quickstart students have a cohort with whom they can process their time abroad.

The Quickstart language classroom capitalizes on this dynamic of shared experience. It promotes collective analysis and promotes community. And, at least at Knox, we have a ten week term of daily 70 minute class meetings to do so. And do so in the target language.

Whereas the first term is a principally practical auditioning for the trip abroad, the second term is an analytical, reflective debriefing. Fortuitously, this plays right into the hands of the language teacher. The pre-departure term focuses on vocabulary, set phrases, the present tense and the like. The class's mood is one of excitement and anticipation. While the post-trip term sets off into descriptions of past events, the subjunctive, views and opinions, the hypothetical "if" clause. The instructor of the Quickstart course does not have to create imaginary scenes in which these grammatical structures might ostensibly occur. The instructor and the students alike have lived those experiences together. We have hours of tape, hundreds maybe even thousands of photos, and the journals to analyze, edit and creatively produce yet more understanding of culture and language. Language learning is wholly

contextualized with personal experience, and therefore more meaningful.

Students have the opportunity to take away a deeper and more internalized relationship with the target language than in the conventional classroom.

I was skeptical of the Quickstart program initially. I believed that students would think their two weeks travelling was enough of this international experiential stuff. I was wrong. Quickstart seems to give students a taste of the value of study abroad and a majority continue studying the target language of their Quickstart course and will do just about anything in order to get back out into the world and participate in a longer term study abroad experience.