Memo

To: Deborah Thurlow
From: Thomas Tiemann and Steve DeLoach
CC: John Burbridge, Dean, Love School of Business
     Bettina Brown, Isabella Cannon Centre for International Studies
     Greg Lilly, Chair of the Department of Economics
Date: 12/17/01
Re: Proposal for Carnegie Initiative 2001-2002

Towards a Deeper Understanding of Study Abroad Experiences:
A New Model for Group Experiential Learning

John G. Sommer writes that when students study abroad, they are “forced to examine many of their
fundamental assumptions – assumptions whose existence they may not ever have recognized before.”¹
However, it is our position that this intellectual transition is neither guaranteed nor efficiently facilitated
during Elon’s winter-term travel courses. One of the main difficulties is simply an issue of time and
space. As a result, our study focuses on how intellectual engagement can be fostered through creating
space for reflective integration in travel courses.

As we have learned at Elon, learning is most effectively viewed as a partnership. The study
abroad experience is also most effective when it is experienced in a small, learning community. Elon
students on a study abroad trip have numerous shared experiences, but often reflect on those
experiences privately, frequently missing the intellectual lessons learned in both academic and social situations. We emphasize the importance of keeping a reflective journal and writing a reflective paper after returning to Elon, but we often miss crucial opportunities for shared reflection during the trip while the experiences are still fresh.
II. ELON WINTER TERM STUDY ABROAD: RESPONSIBILITIES, GOALS, AND THE EXISTING MODEL OF REFLECTION

Studying abroad during a winter term course is a unique learning experience. As such, the role of the instructor in such a course is vastly different from that in the typical on-campus, semester-long course. It is important to understand these demands in order to focus more precisely upon the problems. In particular, there is unavoidable tension that exists between the two fundamental responsibilities of the course instructor.

According to the Winter Term 2001 Study Abroad Faculty Handbook, the responsibilities of a study abroad leader include:

- “provide leadership and management of all facets of the course of study while abroad” (i.e., budget, student discipline and medical emergencies, etc…)
- “provide a well-conceived course which integrates the theoretical dimension of a discipline or subject on inquiry with an experientially based approach, following the guidelines in “Designing a Study Abroad Course.”

The guidelines above are separated into (1) academic, (2) personal growth, and (3) cultural awareness goals. The common thread that runs through them is critical thinking. Critical thinking is reasoned, reflective thinking using appropriate standards of evaluation for the express purpose of reaching a conclusion as to what to believe, eventually arriving at a set of considered, chosen beliefs. This kind of thinking and development is exactly what study abroad experiences should force students to do.

The key to critical thinking is, obviously, reflection. One model of student reflection that has been promoted in the Handbook is the Integrative Processing Model (IPM) developed by Pamela Kiser. The IPM emphasizes six steps: (1) Gathering Objective Data for the concrete Experience, (2) Reflection, (3) Identifying Relevant Knowledge, (4) Examining Dissonance, (5) Articulating Learning and (6) Developing a Plan.

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The steps we want to focus our attention on are (2) through (4). Though study abroad almost automatically creates dissonance, it is the reflection when this dissonance is examined which is difficult to achieve during a month-long trip. According to the IPM, students, “assess their own personal reactions to the experience. In doing so, students ask, ‘How does this situation touch upon my own values? How does it relate to my personal history? …what assumptions am I making about the people involved in this situation?’…” (Kiser, P. 1)

Next, students are expected to “identify theoretical, conceptual, and/or factual information” (Kiser, p.2) that can help them to make sense of their experiences and put them into context. In other words, students are trying to find (or remember) that organizing framework to which this set of experiences can be understood. In traditional courses this framework will come from disciplinary (or inter-disciplinary) theory or concepts. During this process, it is inevitable that students experience dissonance. Once they have reflected on the experience and related it to an academic knowledge base, they can analyze the dissonance. Kiser argues that students should be in a position to ask themselves questions like “what, if anything, do I feel uncomfortable about in this situation?” (Kiser, p. 2).

The IPM model has proven to be enormously useful, especially when it is applied to experiences that are personal. It provides a solid foundation for us to begin thinking about the kind of processing that is needed in courses which, like study abroad, are based on group experiences.

III. CHALLENGES OF STUDY ABROAD: CONSTRAINTS PRESENTED BY THE CURRENT MODEL

Guiding students through the critical thinking process poses a difficult challenge for any instructor. While study abroad is essentially learning through experience, it differs in a number of important ways from most other forms of experiential learning. This is especially true of short-term study abroad experiences like an Elon's.

1. The instructor must function not only as a teacher, but also as a leader, tour guide and administrator, handling budgets, student discipline, medical emergencies, etc…
2. The learning process is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
3. Unlike most internships and many service projects, study abroad is a group learning experience.

The consequences of these relatively unique characteristics are that
1. The facilitator does not have enough time and opportunity during a trip to provide the vital feedback needed to help students think critically about what they are experiencing.

   Linda Elder and Richard Paul, two of the most important scholars on teaching critical thinking, emphasize the importance of designing specific tactics into courses that facilitate this deep learning.\(^5\) They argue that one of the most effective tactics for fostering critical thinking is Socratic questioning.\(^6\) This can be particularly effective when talking about shared intellectual experiences. The questioner can play the part of the “critical inner voice” that focuses the student on this process of questioning shared assumptions, recognizing both shared and alternative points of view, processing the data experienced, focusing on key concepts by which the information must be understood, and challenging students to consider the broader implications of their thinking and the thinking of the people they meet.

   Unfortunately, Socratic questioning takes time: time to prepare and time to conduct it. Unfortunately, time is the faculty member’s most precious commodity on a Winter Term trip. Finding a way to force students to engage in Socratic-style reflection during the trip would allow students to learn to reflect more effectively *during* the trip, providing them with better skills to use to improve their experience.

2. Because there is no clear line between learning and socializing, students have a tendency to make inappropriate lines of demarcation between the two. As a result, they often fail to reflect adequately upon important learning experiences, missing out on much of the potential benefits.

   Ideally, the instructor would regularly point out to students that almost every thing they do while abroad is a learning experience. Struggling to buy lunch in a restaurant where no one else speaks English, noticing the difference between the goods offered in tourist areas and the rest of a city, or even being a “foreign student” in a night club, all result in learning, but students seldom reflect upon such experiences.

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\(^6\) *Critical Thinking: Basic Theory and Instructional Structures*, Foundation for Critical Thinking, 1999, Dillon Beach, CA.
3. Standard teaching models for experiential learning focus on individual reflection as the means by which the experiences are processed internally.

Awareness of the group dimension present in study abroad programs has been recognized in the study abroad literature. For example, in a recent edition of *Transitions Abroad* Karen Rodriquez argues for increased emphasis on group reflection, noting that “discussion sessions provide both a forum and framework in which students can process their experiences.” This is the goal of our proposal: to find a way to provide Socratic-based, group reflection during an Elon Winter Term study abroad course.

IV. STUDY PLAN: TOWARDS A NEW MODEL OF GROUP REFLECTION

Simply stated, we want make experiential learning of a study abroad trip more powerful and profound. To accomplish this, we intend to develop a new model for group processing of experiential learning (GPEL) appropriate both to study abroad and other group projects (e.g. service learning).

Using multiple levels of expert-learners/travelers, we think that we can more effectively provide the kind of critical feedback that is required for deep learning to take place. Specifically, we plan to work with two teaching assistants (TAs) who have been on the previous trip (in Jan. 2001) and train them as peer group leaders for the January 2002 trip. Since they will have been on the trip the year before, they will have a good understanding of the course goals as well as the pitfalls that students experience throughout the trip. Working closely with Drs. Tiemann and DeLoach, the TAs will develop a model for interviewing and questioning the students throughout the course of the Jan. 2002 trip. This interviewing will be done at regular intervals, in small groups, on video without the instructor present. We feel that this relatively private “confessional” time will prove to be a vital exercise for group reflection.

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7 “Cultural Immersion,” *Transitions Abroad*, May/June 2000, p. 82.
These videotapes provide a record of the students’ reflection and will be used in a number of ways.

1. Students will be able to review their reflections and see how they have progressed intellectually while studying abroad.
2. The TAs conducting the interviews, the “expert learner/travelers,” will be able to show students the tapes and point how learning has taken place both during “class time” and in social settings.
3. Upon return, the tapes will be used for research, teaching, and assessment, as well as being part of the process of journal writing and final reflection.

The tapes will be used to look for evidence of intellectual growth and greater critical thinking, hopefully using these results to produce a paper and conference presentation. The tapes could also be used to train future expert learner/travelers to conduct group reflection session using Socratic questioning; faculty interested in using Socratic questioning in any class could also use the tapes for training. The record of reflection provided by the tapes is also a record of student progress and outcomes and will provide the data needed to assess both the course and the Initiative.

V. TIMELINE

October 2000: Dr. Tiemann will begin to get this year’s students prepared for their trip. This is the beginning of the training that will lead to the selection of the TAs for the following year.

Feb 2001: Dr. Tiemann will lead the Café Europa 2001 trip this January term. After that, we will choose two students (preferably one male and one female) who are willing to serve as TAs for the Café Europa 2002 trip.

September 2001: Drs. Tiemann and DeLoach in coordination with the TAs to:
1. develop the new Socratic-questioning group reflection model appropriate for interviewing the students
2. learn to operate the video equipment effectively
3. practice interviewing with past students
4. develop a detailed course outline and schedule to accompany the new course model

October 2001: Dr DeLoach and the two TAs begin meetings with Café Europa 2002. Before the end of the term, the TAs will interview all of the new students on tape in order to record a “baseline” in terms of attitudes and expectations for each student.

February 2002: Drs. Tiemann and DeLoach work with the TAs to edit and produce a video for the entire course. Students will have a chance to view their rough segments prior to writing their final reflective trip paper.

Summer 2002: Drs. DeLoach and Tiemann will use the data and experience, hoping to develop an extension to the Integrated Processing Model, one that can be used for group reflection conducted by more experienced students. We will also be in a position to assist others leading Winter Term Study Abroad trips in their use of this new reflection model. A public viewing, or presentation of the final project will occur either in the spring or fall of 2002.

VI. BUDGET

The only expenses this proposal requests are those associated with funding for the trip costs for student TAs, the expert learner/travelers. The grant would pay for the extra costs incurred by Elon for the expert learner/travelers: their airfare to and from Europe, rail fares and hotels costs while in Europe, and their share of enrichment funding. The charge to the grant would not pay for a portion of the faculty members’ expenses. The grant would give the expert learner/travelers a meal stipend and pay their airfare to and from New York to join the trip.

VII. SUMMARY

We have proposed a plan of study, appropriate for the unique demands of study abroad courses, which builds on the models of integrative processing while promoting and strengthening the goals of one of Elon College’s premier academic programs. If time and space can be made for more thoughtful and effective processing of the group learning experience, we can enhance the personal, intellectual growth that each student experiences.