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# Epilogue

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The papers in this special issue highlight the ways in which study abroad (SA) has been reimagined since the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, an unprecedented time when international travel was abruptly paused. As both the virus and society's responses to it continue to evolve, it would be unwise (and frankly impossible) to simply resume SA programming as if nothing has happened. Life as we know it has changed. But what makes us the same despite differences in borders, time zones, and languages—what makes us all humans—is our ability to face adversity head-on and adapt to changes in ways we never knew were possible. Such discoveries serve as the products of change, shaping where the field of international education is headed. This special issue has brought to light the ways in which students, teachers, and administrators have creatively navigated SA throughout the peaks and valleys of the pandemic, thus charting a path forward through previously uncharted territory. In this epilogue, we summarize notions from the contributing authors to answer the following questions concerning *quo vadis*, or where the field of SA is headed.

1. What makes SA worthwhile for students?
2. What makes SA valuable to language professionals?
3. How can administrators increase access to SA and balanced program content?

## 1. WHAT MAKES SA WORTHWHILE FOR STUDENTS?

This collection of papers on SA details with surprising clarity the field's current trends on student motivation both for the period during and after the height of the pandemic. Today's students seem to go abroad for a completely different set of reasons than what motivated their mentors, that dedicated core of language teachers along with their departments who pursued, in their day, a sincere aspiration of becoming quasi-native speakers embracing a series of idealized target national portraits. Despite being painfully aware of the present pressing international and ecological crises—maybe even more mindful than any other generation—students go abroad primarily to enhance their own personal knowledge and experience, which Basterretxea and Sanz (this issue) have broadly captured under the label of *enlightenment*. While the interruption caused by COVID has not altered this basic student priority in recent years, health-related factors do indeed pose a new challenge for those who pursue SA. Nevertheless,

the motivations reported here concur with Kinginger and Zhuang's findings in their forthcoming book about SA alumni, the majority of whom expressed their sincere desire to learn another culture, the culture of the *other*, without any neoliberal transactional or adventurist overtones.

It is no secret that SA provides students with the time, space, and opportunity to learn new practices, knowledge, and skills that are typically out of reach in a traditional classroom setting. Whether or not students take advantage of these opportunities is highly dependent on their identities, the design of their SA program, and the access they have to the community in which they are immersed. It is also no surprise that the many restrictions posed by COVID-19 severely limited one of the main advantages offered by SA, that of social interaction. As Levine-West et al. (this issue) aptly point out, although social distancing practices equated with more isolation during the height of the pandemic, students highly value the social interactions and cultural experiences that a sojourn abroad provides and associate such interactions with increased L2 learning. Davidson and Garas (this issue) corroborate this finding in their study, confirming that L2 learners who studied abroad in person consistently demonstrated higher oral proficiency than those who participated in a virtual program at home. Although well-designed virtual programs can certainly provide innovative opportunities for cultural and linguistic exchanges, as shown by Shiri (this issue), there is something *transformative* about being present in a new space beyond what is familiar. By leaving home, Dorothy was confronted with problems that needed to be solved, resulting in new discoveries about herself, others, and the world far beyond what Kansas could provide her (Nyitray, this issue).

## 2. WHAT MAKES SA VALUABLE TO LANGUAGE PROFESSIONALS?

For previous generations, language professionals worked incessantly to perfect their linguistic skills in service of becoming representatives, or even defenders, as it were, of their adopted L2 community and its perceived virtues (in the case of native speakers, the motivation entailed a certain element of nostalgia, too). Perfecting the L2 at an advanced or superior level requires, at a bare minimum, the proverbial 10,000 hours of engagement, if not more—something not part of the plan for most SA programs. Consequently, L2 proficiency, while still highly desirable, does not constitute a realistic goal for SA, nor is it the principal goal for most participants (see Kinginger & Zhuang, in press).

Intercultural competence (ICC), then, has currently taken on more importance than achieving high L2 proficiency. By ICC, we not only mean pragmatic competence, but also the state of being open to other ways of seeing the world and different ways of doing things—in other words, being willing to explore and consider, rather than compare and judge, as Leaver and Campbell (this issue) have precisely explained. Here constitutes the perfect opening into which the SA curriculum can weave in current thinking about diversity, equity, and inclusion, without falling prey to idealizing or stereotyping any one culture, that of the L2 or the L1.

Nevertheless, understanding L2 humor, sarcasm, irony, idiomatic insults, contemporary slang, face-threatening speech acts, and *double entendres* requires sophisticated linguistic knowledge of the type that can never be taught or learned in any authentic or realistic way in the traditional classroom. Without instruction, this kind of pragmatic knowledge is typically acquired in a painfully slow manner through social interactions with the TL community, one exchange at a time. Fortunately, Morris (this issue) confirms that SA students who receive explicit instruction on salient pragmatic norms of their L2 are more confident and successful when engaging in meaningful tasks in their host community. Furthermore, encountering unexpected real-world

circumstances in a SA program not only forces creative uses of language, but also fosters confidence in students' ability to communicate, even if imperfectly. As the students themselves say, it means leaving your comfort zone. Hence, the opportunities that language practitioners can provide students in a traditional classroom simply cannot compete with the quantity and quality of experiences they may encounter while abroad. In fact, as shown by Kennedy-Terry (this issue), social networks with L2 speakers are crucial for L2 development during SA and can even predict the success of student learning while abroad.

As a central part of students' social network, host families can be a crucial factor in helping students meet these challenges with success. Although in-person contact with families is best, homestays can be valuable even when imagined, as Shiri (this issue) demonstrated in her innovative use of Zoom during the height of the pandemic. A student who participated in Blake's 2022 summer program in Spain put it succinctly: "The most meaningful experience during this trip, by far, has been getting to know the Spanish host families in general, and Spanish women in particular, all of whom exemplify love, earnestness, and strength" (Blake, personal communication)

### 3. HOW CAN ADMINISTRATORS INCREASE ACCESS TO SA AND BALANCED PROGRAM CONTENT?

The group of researchers represented in this special issue agree that as SA programs relaunch themselves in full force, more action must be taken to create equitable access to SA programs among students of diverse backgrounds. Although the diversity of U.S. SA students has grown throughout the past decade, the majority (70%) of students are still non-Hispanic white (IEE, 2021). Particularly troublesome are the results highlighted by Basterretxea and Sanz (this issue), who predict that enrollment of SA participants from minority and low-income backgrounds may become even lower than it is now, particularly due to health-related factors posed by the pandemic. To create a more sustainable and equitable future for SA, Quan et al. (this issue) insist that it is crucial to unpack the ideologies that perpetuate unjust social structures and move toward adopting critical and translingual pedagogies rooted in social justice.

In addition to the imbalance in student enrollment, administrators are faced with finding the right balance of content to maximize students' time abroad both for the learners and the host community. Not surprisingly then, most SA programs are now offered through English-mediated instruction (EMI). But despite this overwhelming EMI trend, once having had an experience abroad, students are more likely to want to engage internationally, again—and at that later time, the value of L2 development may be clearer or more valuable to them, for both language majors and non-majors. The continued emphasis on professional careers will, no doubt, reinforce this EMI trend, but language and target-language (TL) content courses will still flourish nonetheless, as authors Nyitray (this issue) and Barrenetxea and Sanz (this issue), have taken pains to point out. Language departments should take stock of these trends and adapt their programs in order to best appeal to student interests, unfettered by unrealistic expectations that SA students must reach near-native linguistic levels at the end of these time-compressed educational experiences. In fact, 65% of Kinginger and Zhuang's informants stated that they went on to use their new language skills in practical ways in their careers.

Finally, the opportunities for SA students to volunteer and engage with the local communities must be expanded. This can only happen if **home**-campus administrators invite their **host**-campus counterparts to collaborate as equal partners. Usually, the issue comes down to who gives credit for what—in a word, who is in control. As Griffin (this issue) made

clear in her study, going forward in the endemic phase of COVID, both home and host administrators should work in unison with equal input and control to maximize the SA experience for all communities involved.

## CONCLUSION

The articles in this special issue shed light on the many ways in which international education has been impacted since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. While it is true that SA programs were canceled and students were brought home, this traumatic moment of history that we have shared across borders and during several years now has resulted in innovative discoveries that will continue to shape how the field moves forward. Virtual exchanges will undoubtedly continue to form part of the SA curriculum, but more as a supporting component rather than the central part. Although many lessons have been learned from SA during COVID-19, future research is needed to explore the additional consequences of the pandemic on international education and their implications, particularly for L2 learning. Nevertheless, the discoveries outlined in this issue will help pave the way for more accessible, dynamic, and inclusive programs that prioritize what is best for the future generation of students.

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