

to the diffusion of English and to the fact that most of the tourist attractions (monuments and historical sites) are in the center of the city and so are bars, restaurants, schools and hotels. English is the principle language heard and spoken in most of the places and none of the students have troubles finding supermarkets, banks and post offices where English is somehow spoken.

### **American Students' Troubles and Obstacles in Interacting with Italian Contemporaries**

Objective difficulties to explain why lots of American students do not meet Italian students of their age can be found; the encounter proves to be hard. It is shown from American student evaluations at the end of their study abroad programs that they are not able to get to know natives of their same age and that how to interact with them remains a mystery for the American students. It is sure that, if the chances of meeting are not many, the possibilities of real interaction and collaboration, or rather of cultural mixing between the two groups of American and Italian students, are even less. But what exactly are these barriers and, above all, why do these two worlds tend to no longer interact, even if they represent contemporary groups sharing tastes and interests due to globalization?

The linguistic barrier cannot be considered a real obstacle, because the 19-22 year old Italians have at least a basic middle and high school knowledge of English, so they can have a conversation, even if with some difficulty, with foreign people of the same age. This allows American students to always feel comfortable and not to put too much effort in finding new ways of conversation.

In her article, Isabel Eva Bober (2010) focuses on the use of the Internet by students studying abroad, noting problems posed by the never-ending connection with friends and family provided by social networks. On one hand it does not make the student feel the homesickness and the culture shock, but on the other hand it takes away precious time to live and experience every opportunity offered by the study abroad program and its troubles, because loneliness and need for adaptation are two keys that make a student know and get closer to people of the same age: if they don't face these "obstacles," spending all their free time on the Internet, they will never explore actively the foreign reality.

Accommodations and meeting points are definitely an advantage and at the same time an obstacle for a student wanting to experience a new culture and to immerse himself/herself into the daily atmosphere of a society. All the different types of accommodation (living with an Italian

## **FOOD AND CULTURE: A CASE STUDY, INTERCULTURAL PROJECTS WITH ITALIAN AND AMERICAN STUDENTS**

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### **Studying Abroad: Interculture and Experiences**

#### **Rome, Florence and Venice: Favorite Cities for American Students**

If you never get away from what is well known to you, it's hard to experience real cultural difference: this is Celeste Kinginger's (2009) thesis in her essay "American Students Abroad: Negotiation of Difference." The American student spending a medium or long term (from 1 to 4 months) in a study abroad program should face, besides the culture shock, several obstacles and troubles due to the approach and the interaction, not always spontaneous, with a different culture, sometimes considered strange and unfamiliar. The survey "L'Italia secondo i giovani americani" ("Italy according to young Americans") brings out that young Americans decide to move and live a part of their youth (from 1 to 12 months, in case of longer study abroad program) in Italy because first of all they are drawn by the Italian lifestyle (36,80%), the quality of the food (18,22%) and the cultural difference (Bernardi and Zundel 2011).

Among the Italian cities preferred by American tourists, Rome, Florence and Venice always stand out because of their history and culture, and that preference influences the choice of destination for students studying abroad in Italy.

All the same, beauty, culture and life quality are not the only factors attracting Americans, but also the easiness of moving through the city due

family, sharing a flat with Italian students, living in a dormitory, with other foreign students) have their advantages and disadvantages in terms of independence, language learning and mixing with the local culture. Moreover, as said before, American students tend not to go out of the city center because most of the activities and clubs dedicated to foreigners are concentrated in the most central tourist zones and, as a consequence, they do not need to move from the historic center to have fun. They do not feel the real need of moving if everything is close at hand. Furthermore, the road conditions and punctuality of public transportation in big cities like Rome, Milan and Venice are undoubtedly not efficient. American students, differing from the majority of Italian students, don't have a private means of transport, so part of their movement is influenced by the lines and directions of public transportation and the ease of reaching places with buses or subway (where available), conditions their routes, timetables, places, and situations to see as well.

How and where do foreign students have fun? Economic possibilities influence the way of having fun for every student of the world. American students stay in Italian cities for short to medium terms, so they want to exploit their time as much as possible and do the most they can. The Italian student, off-site or not, very often has to make many economic sacrifices so that he or she manages his/her finances in order to satisfy his or her needs without overstepping the limits. Starting from the use of economic resources it is possible to underline a few differences between the Italian and American students' behavior during their free time.

American students tend to purchase more alcohol than Italians, and this kind of behavior can be seen in activities like binge drinking (drinking on purpose in order to get quickly drunk) and pub crawls' (evenings organized only to drink in different pubs with a group of people). American students tend to share these moments all together in a group. These "drinking tours" are often organized by foreigners who are now settled in Italy and who have connections with bars and clubs. These tours allow students to drink at low prices, speak their language and feel somehow protected, because they are part of a group (from 20 to 100 people) of the same age, often from the same background. Inhibitions and shyness disappear in favor of great situations to socialize for study abroad students, but only with other foreign students coming from a similar context, not with Italians of the same age who have nothing to do with these organizations and amusement activities which are believed to be and labeled—often in a pejorative way—as "for foreign people."

It is also interesting to read about the amusement habits and the choice of clubs of American students, in particular in the article written by Sylvia

Poggioli "Study-Abroad Students Gone Wild in Italy?" reported on National Public Radio (NPR) on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008, about the fact that the real inhabitants of cities, in this case Florence, have left the center because of the invasion of Americans. "The Number One market in Florence is tourism and the second is the American college student, [...] They are the dominant factors in the historic center of the city. Florentines don't live here, it doesn't belong to them anymore, and they're resentful of that and they should be" (ibid). Unfortunately, Kinginger's essay supports some of the American students' fears, concerning Italians avoiding them and not being interested in interacting with them. In Sylvia Poggioli's report, when asked about American students, one of the interviewed answered "You have this group of students who come and they have great passion and enthusiasm, and then they don't know quite what to do when they get here or where to go," he (the interviewee) said "The city is not open to them outside of their classrooms: (Florence) it's a difficult city to get to know and connect to" (2008).

Italian students do not get together in the clubs cast in the same mold as those that target mostly American study abroad students. Due to the fact that these clubs do not have the features sought by an Italian student they are not considered interesting by them and so they do not go there.

As a matter of fact, the clubs chosen by American students tend to recreate a familiar environment recalling American food, music and entertainment, such as broadcasts of hockey or football matches, all of which has little to do with Italian entertainment. Also the alcohol level reached by the majority of American students is definitely a deterrent that pushes away Italian students. That is not a way to discriminate against a certain type of clubs, it is more a lack of sharing the same ones that divides instead of drawing the two groups together. The news stories about riots and other unpleasant situations close to these places have only accentuated the distance.

Traveling around Europe is one of the most expensive activities engaged in by American students while studying abroad, because they tend to spend a huge part of their money traveling to nearby European capitals, such as Paris, Amsterdam and London. This is encouraged as well by low cost airlines and even through university associations like ESN Italy<sup>2</sup>, with the result that students prefer such cities to Italian counterparts. The fact of having only 4 months at their disposal adds to the pressure. Students feel that they must concentrate even 6 or 7 trips in consecutive weekends, with very high costs.

Lastly, American students have the tendency of choosing to live together during the study abroad term and, as Kinginger claims (2009,

219) this influences the choice of accommodation, too. As a matter of fact, the 2010 University of California San Diego Study Abroad Alumni Survey showed that of almost 4000 students that spent a part of their studies abroad, 88.2% had chosen not to live in shared apartments with students of different nationalities, preferring to stay together with their compatriots<sup>3</sup>.

### Some Solutions and Results

In the city of Rome some activities to allow a better aggregation between Italian and American students were organized last year (2010). For example, there are club-themed evenings to encourage meetings between students of different nationalities, but in reality they set up a phony environment, in order to make money and get more business. Italian universities more often organize evenings for foreign students, but most of the time they are distinguished by the predominance of English over the other languages, so they prevent the students from learning or improving Italian.

To overcome all these problems, several solutions have been prepared, before and during the study abroad term (by the US Study abroad office or by the On-site/Hosting Provider). For instance, the USL (University Language Services) website recommends that students focus more on the places surrounding the city chosen for the study abroad<sup>4</sup>, rather than visiting more European capitals in a short term. In this way, they do not have a fragmentary knowledge of different places, but they are an integral part of the reality they have chosen to live in. The provider of the study abroad program sets up extracurricular activities such as scavenger hunts, trips in popular districts, etc., because they help the students to know the routes of buses serving suburban zones and so that they know the city outside the tourist path.

In addition, students have been kept up to date about concerts and themed evenings through magazines designed for them so that they can consciously choose what to do, through the more conventional paper magazine or the Internet. For instance *Romeing*<sup>5</sup> is a good example of a magazine for tourists or people now living in Rome; it is free and offers a selection of the latest and most diverse cultural and lifestyle events in and around Rome.

Sharing a house with Italian students increases significantly the learning and interaction possibilities with Italians and the understanding of their lifestyle and culture as well as being a guest in an Italian house, because living with a family provides a student with the likelihood of a more authentic intercultural experience.

Despite the aforementioned strategies carried out, the results achieved so far are not satisfactory. Due to the troubles faced by students, they are not able to have a real Italian experience so it is necessary to develop new solutions in order to make them feel integrated in a different reality and give them a new cultural awareness.

### Study Abroad: Between Tourism and Real Life.

#### Food as a Means to Identify What is Authentic in a Culture

One of the most common questions, concerning study abroad students, is whether they can have a real and authentic experience of a new culture. Tourism was once called The Grand Tour. The Grand Tour was a traveling experience the bourgeois made, generally in Europe (France, Italy, Germany etc.). This kind of journey was a really diffused practice thought to enrich one's own knowledge and view of a different culture. Not everyone had a positive view of this "journey" because most of the times the travelers had a sort of "culture shock" due to a different way of living. The question is, is this "culture shock" still possible?

Nowadays everything is prepared and set in order to attract tourists and make them feel comfortable and "at home." This fact seems to take out a little bit of authenticity from the traveling experience. Many people think that today an authentic experience is impossible. Take Giovanna Nigro, for example. She is a professor at University of Bari whose course "Turismo e Linguaggio" (2010) explains how the will to create a cultural background, in order to alienate the tourist as little as possible, takes out the authenticity from a place. This happens to reduce the extraneousness of the touristic land. She goes on quoting Dean MacCannell (a cultural critic, a professor of landscape architecture, and vice-chair of the geography graduate program at the University of California) who, in his *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976), talks about Staged Authenticity, that is a fake authenticity organized and created by the travel industry (the expression Staged Authenticity was borrowed by E. Goffman). Taking inspiration from MacCannell, Wendy Hillman (from the University of Queensland, Australia), talks about the "business" that lays behind the tourist world surrounded by "tourism operators, guides, staff, advertising and marketing [...] This has been constructed for them by the tourist enterprise and industry where forms of authenticity are staged for the unsuspecting and enthusiastic pursuer (2007)."

Take for example "Cultural Exchange Through Cuisine: the Conversation between France and America" by Anna Consic (2009). She

entitles one of her paragraphs "Questions of Authenticity," in which the culinary aspect of a culture is thought to be in a state of constant changing. "Cuisine is not a static, protected object" and "globalization threatens cultural uniqueness [...]." Going on we find Lucy Long (from Bowling Green University in Ohio) who was the first to coin the term "culinary tourism" in 1998. She, in the same way as the previous essays do, thinks that it is not the tourists who adapt themselves to the foreign culture but it is the other way around, "Restaurants, as several essays in this volume show, are prime sites of designed experiences, collaboratively produced. As businesses, not museums (though often like museums), they adapt themselves to their market, including both their customers and their competition (2004)." It is the market, the customer who takes the lead.

So on one hand sociologists think the market of tourism is shaping and changing one's own culture, on the other hand there is a growing interest in experiencing "culinary traveling" to discover different cultures and visit foreign lands through tasting trips. This diffuse practice has been called "Culinary Tourism."

This authenticity issue is even more important to students studying abroad because they are protected and shielded from the outside world twice: by their school and by the travel industry. If we just take a look and read some articles on websites created for students who want to study abroad, like *Global Study Magazine*<sup>6</sup>, we find that students are pushed toward an authentic experience such as "Research culturally authentic experiences" where they are told to "familiarize themselves with the unique cultural events and landmarks in their chosen Big 5 destination city," or like on *StudyAbroad.com*<sup>7</sup> where students can find syllabi like "Learn Italian in Authentic Tuscany."

While such programs are willing to make the students experience a real and authentic Italian life while abroad, the problem is whether, once in Italy, they will resist the commodity and leisure (as MacCannell would say) set by the travel industry and marketing. After all it is a 50/50 relationship. On one hand there are some places "staged" by the travel industry but on the other hand it is up to the tourist or the student to go beyond the "backstage" and live the authentic life of the host country. Take Rome for example, one of the most ancient cities in the world. In some areas of Rome, such as downtown, a tourist can feel at home because one can communicate easily in English and read shop signs written in English. This happens because downtown is the most visited area by tourists, but in this way the foreigner doesn't experience the authentic roman life and won't learn the Italian language at all. It should be specified however, that a student on a study abroad program is not

considered a tourist, but a temporary resident who stays in a foreign country a certain period of time, generally from one to four months. This longer permanence is relevant to the student in order to get to know a different culture.

### Projects on Intercultural Communication through Food in Italy

It is important to analyze the presence of programs, schools or conferences willing to arrange intercultural communication through food and cuisine. As a matter of fact, just doing some research it can be discovered that many institutions and organizations are moving to integrate this huge world-population, mixed up by the flux of migration and globalization. Elementary and middle schools are trying to help children to know each other in order to overcome their geographical and cultural gap. One of the main devices used for this integration is food. Take bread for example, a main character of a lecture given on May 13th, 1999 by the City of Bologna entitled "Atti del Seminario I Rituali del Cibo: il Valore del Cibo e del Digiuno nelle Diverse Culture," part of a bigger project called "Quaderni dei Progetti Interculturali." Just reading the title it can be easily understood how a single and simple thing, like bread, can unite and connect different cultures, geographic spaces and most of all people. If we just think about it, every piece of bread, in every part of the world, is made of water, flour, salt and yeast. Even if Spain calls it *pan*, France *pain* and Italy *pane*, the ingredients are all the same. Every country brings with it a past, a tradition and its own way to shape, mould and cook the ingredients at its disposal. Each nation, village or city has salt, flour, potatoes, tomatoes, pasta, peppers and so on and other foods and ingredients, in which one difference is the way in which they use it and call it. This is the reason why eating food of another country, besides one's own, is a direct experience that goes beyond any language and knowledge barrier.

What the Bologna lecture wanted to achieve is listed in the following points<sup>8</sup>:

- to stress similarities and differences in the habits and customs of everyday life, in this way directly involving the students, and trace back to their own personal experience the events and the phenomena taken into consideration;
- to furnish the students with some new and diverse insights through which they will analyze what happens in the world and what they have already experienced;

• to try to stimulate the creation of different connections with other possible "concept maps."

Schools are trying to instruct early-aged students in tolerance, in order to live peacefully through common sense: taste. As Laura Bandelloni (2009) would say "*Più ancora della parola, il cibo si presta ad essere mediatore fra culture diverse, ad aprire il mondo alchemico della cucina ad invenzioni e contaminazioni impensate.* (Even more than the word can do, food is able to act as a mediator between different cultures, to open the alchemic world of the kitchen up to unexpected inventions and contaminations)."

Many other "actions" taken by different institutions of cultural exchange can be quoted, but just to name a few: "Le Spezie nella Cucina del Mondo"<sup>9</sup> which is part of an organization called "Festa Multietnica," was an event organized by the city of Alessandria on June 7th, 2006 that wanted to improve the life of many foreigners who decided to move to Italy; "Quaderni di Porto Franco: Toscana Terra dei Popoli e delle Culture"<sup>10</sup>, a project of the Region of Tuscany in which the Project Documents 1998-2001 includes a section describing food as a means through which people can connect with the culture of different countries.

Needless to say that just by surfing the Internet many websites and blogs that publicize and promote cultural exchange through food can be found; such as "Know My World"<sup>11</sup>, or the organization "SEED"<sup>12</sup>, which hosted an event in Lugano on June 20th, 2011 called "Food and Games for Cultural Exchange," or "la Cucina Multietnica"<sup>13</sup>, that combines Greek, Brazilian, Chinese, Nigerian cuisine with many other recipes and ingredients from the whole world.

People want to claim their roots through food and recipes but at the same time they want to discover and learn those cultures that influence each other. The whole world is characterized by different traditions but, at the same time, united by common ingredients that everyone shapes and cooks with in the way he/she has been taught by someone else.

### A Case Study in Rome: Intercultural Communication and Food Interaction.

#### Scenario

Intercultural communication is a word with many meanings, but it is based on observation and analysis about how people from different cultural backgrounds interact and communicate with each other. It engages many scholarly areas such as cultural anthropology, communication and

many more in order to create a solid academic framework. At its foundation there is the desire to determine and understand how people from different cultures communicate in order to improve these interrelationships.

What inspired the birth of the project described in this article is the belief that it is possible to create new devices in order to help students who are involved in a study abroad program develop skills in intercultural communication. It is a common thought that through food, analyzed both from a culinary and cultural point of view, dynamics of cross-cultural training can be improved or emphasized.

#### Background

This idea lays its foundations in the necessity to study two different groups of students: one coming from an American university, at the time involved in a study abroad program in Rome, and the other coming from an Italian university in Rome. The students belonging to the Italian university were majoring in English language, with both different academic backgrounds and language levels. Every American and Italian student was more or less the same age as the other, to be more precise:

- Both groups of students were in the second or third year of university;
- The American students were enrolled in the same university, precisely the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. Not every student came from the same state; most were from Illinois, but others came from the northeastern part of the United States. Most of them at the time had not decided their majors, so they belonged to different departments (finance, animal studies, advertising, communication, journalism, business, nutrition studies). Every student involved in the project was part of the study abroad program in Rome—Food & Culture and Food & Media—managed by a hosting academic institution called the Gustolab Institute, Center for Food and Culture (hereafter the "F&C Program"). The program was composed of 5 courses: Italian Language (101—beginners), Layers of Rome (Art and Architectural History of Rome), Italian Contemporary Society (Sociology, Politics and Italian Economy), Food and Culture (History of Italian Food and Cultural Cooking Classes) and Food and Media (Italian media studies—video study);

- Most of the Italian students belonged to the department of Foreign Languages and Literature. Just a few of them were already enrolled in the graduate program.

Why was this project started? The main goals for the Italian university were:

- To give the students enrolled in the language department the opportunity to practice English language but at the same time to speak and communicate with a native speaker. Unfortunately the university doesn't give them many possibilities to test one's own knowledge of a foreign language through interaction and communication with native speaking contemporaries; moreover without this experience they had little chance to practice and get used to the American accent. The problem of most universities in Italy is that the hours they dedicate to practical work on the foreign language are not enough. An example is represented by Roma3 University which on its website defines the "*lettori*" (also known as mother tongue teachers) as "*esperti linguistici*" whereas other teachers are called "professors" (giving them in this way a higher importance for what concerns their academic background). Moreover just taking a look at some timetables it can be seen, for example, that the hours for the students with their *lettori* are not enough. Whoever studies a foreign language can understand how difficult it is to express one's feelings and ideas in another language. The same word "speaking" means interaction, communication and being able to understand the other person, which are all things that only constant practice can give. If we take a quick look at the Roma3 students' final evaluations of the 2007/2008 CLA program<sup>14</sup> (Centro Linguistico di Ateneo) some of them complained about the lack of English practice hours: "*Ho difficoltà ad imparare una lingua senza poterla parlare. Il computer non permette di esercitarsi nel dialogo e non ha la sensibilità per correggere immediatamente e spiegare equivoci ed errori subito*" (I find it hard to learn a language without speaking it. The computer does not give the possibility to practice the language and it is not able to give me feedback right after my mistakes to correct them and give some explanations)<sup>15</sup>.
- In addition, the Italian university was designing a project "Not Just the Colosseum" —also known as the "Cartoline Project." It was a research effort that was supposed to involve first and

second year Italian students attending the courses in English Language and Translation at the University. The students were asked to write some brief paragraphs for an imaginary volume about Rome and its surroundings. The aim of these paragraphs was to convince and captivate a hypothetical visitor's attention and help him/her explore some lesser-known places than those more famous and visited by mass tourism. This challenge for the Italian students represented a part of their final exam. Besides exonerating them from a big part of the exam, it stimulated their minds while trying to find an original way to describe the less visited side of Rome together with the experimentation of a new kind of study and research, the one which gave the possibility to improve one's own creative capacities. In order to complete and emphasize the original ideas that were going to form this project the help of American students was vital, both for what concerned the search for the right place and the translational part followed by the final editing phase (made up of comments and descriptions of every place).

The Rome Study Program main purposes:

- It has been two years since the Food & Culture Program started to ask the students to create and produce a documentary for the final part of the course. After twenty hours of theory dedicated to the study of media techniques added to twenty more hours where they study the history and culture of food in Italy, the American students were requested to identify the two or three most interesting themes that better defined the authenticity and culture of food in Italy. The students worked cooperatively, in a maximum of ten people per group. Besides the main theme, which they would later develop and analyze in a documentary video, they were also requested to decide in which way they wanted to narrate it (whether by interviews or historical and political surveys). It was noticed, in the last two years, that American students had some problems identifying themes concerning the "authenticity of food" that would be interesting for a different audience. They tended to choose simple themes, which showed to be the result of a very superficial analysis: they represented and analyzed what they experienced in everyday life telling anecdotes about meals they ate and liked the most. Many documentaries were about pizza, fried food, *bruschetta* etc. These documentaries totally lacked a critical analysis about society,

current affairs and theoretical notions. American students weren't able to apply the theory they learned during the classes attended (added to the field trips that were organized), to the practical part, which founded the main theme requested (explorations experienced during the discovery of a foreign country through a study abroad program).

- In addition, every year the school ends up facing the weekend issue within a study abroad program in Italy. Most of the time Illinois students arrive in Italy with their free weekends perfectly planned. The weekend is considered as a free time period to be organized with visits (by one's self or in groups) in European cities. What they usually do is travel around Europe, in this way avoiding many parts of the Italian peninsula (with the only exception of Venice and Florence), without finding any linguistic barrier. At the same time the obsessive will of the long term program student to visit as many cities as possible has consequences not so positive for what concerns his/her knowledge. Their memories and thoughts about the variety of cities visited, the location of some monuments and the cultural differences are blurred and chaotic. The students are not able to stress or remember the main social characteristics explored during their trips (without knowing any difference between the Italian regions and what distinguishes a European nation from another). A more accurate exploration of the surrounding areas of Rome and some Italian regions was needed for a better influence concerning the learning results in the two classes attended: Food & Culture and Italian Contemporary Society.

- Lastly, every year, at the end of the course, the Food & Culture Program students are given a questionnaire that aims to stress which difficulties and obstacles each student has found in the study abroad program. Many evaluations included complaints about the lack of contacts with Italian people, Italian contemporaries in particular. Besides a few chats or hanging out together (in festivals, concerts or soccer games) the students did not have any "interaction with Italian students." The reasons found in the questionnaire were naïve: "Italian people hate the Americans, that's why they don't want to talk or hang out with us."

The Gustolab Institute (the hosting institution) is an academic reality, concerned both with the act of supplying the students with a high level academic program and interested in the intensification of the cultural immersion of the student in Italy. The center for food and culture started to think about those hypothetical reasons that could explain the complaints previously described.

Why did American students' curiosity diminish, rather than increase, during the four-month study abroad program?

A possible explanation to the obsessive European trips was that they did not know well the variety of the Italian land (not well promoted or sold in "pack trips" by the specialized travel agencies);

Maybe the American students did not have enough time to interact and meet other Italian students;

What are the difficulties in identifying the authentic, historic and cultural, while traveling and studying in a foreign land?

In conclusion these warning messages have been the turning point of a common reflection upon which a cultural exchange was planned during the 2011 spring between Italian students and University of Illinois Urbana Champaign students.

### Experimental Project in the Spring 2011 Program

The purpose of this project was to unite thirty-two American students and thirty-two Italian students in a mutual collaboration in order to create two parallel projects. The idea was to suggest an exchange of knowledge and support for the following reasons: Italian students were able to finish the assignment given for the Cartoline Project; American students could experience one more cultural value added to a practical support for what concerned their documentary assignment about Italian Food and Culture.

The aim was to stimulate a deeper knowledge, in both groups, of each other's culture. That is why the students were given some keys, tools and devices, useful to better understand the other culture.

To stimulate the three cultural aspects of the project—a cultural meeting, knowledge, interaction and relationship—the Italian university's Cartoline Project was introduced as an integral part of the curriculum of the study abroad program (part of the F&C Program). It mainly consisted in: two informal meetings (a multicultural lunch organized at the Americans' apartments during the orientation; followed by a going out night for a dinner or an *aperitivo* at a some place chosen by the group); two formal meetings where each group had to explain and introduce its own project; and three final group meetings. In these last meetings Italian

and American students were supposed to explore on their own (meeting points and everything else were previously arranged among students in order to better suit their plans) some places decided by the Italian students; they had to document everything through pictures, subtitled videos and descriptions. The final part was the editing phase. The important thing was that everyone participated in every phase and meeting in order to create a mutual collaboration.

The decision to introduce a cultural portfolio (called "Italy is not so bad!") as an "extra credit" cross-cultural assignment was due to the effort of improving and encouraging the students to explore both the surrounding territories and Italian cities. It was considered an additional assignment managed and carefully planned since the first day of the program by the onsite facilitator. A one-hour meeting—once a week—was spent to explain the exploration of the Italian territory (managed by the onsite facilitator) through Powerpoint presentations, videos, or surfing some websites. This hour was designed to suggest, (according to some) in an appealing way, the beauties of the Italian territories. The task was to create a portfolio (whether paper, digital or other possible way—according to one's preferences) in order to collect cultural information related to at least four of the visited places during free time or weekends during the study program period. The portfolio was supposed to put together pictures, tickets, comments and feedback concerning: the typical dish of that place; colors that were representative or common in the location; whether the city has its own symbol or not; as well as questions such as What's the best thing offered by the area you live in? What's the worst/ugliest thing you've seen? What were you most shocked about? What did you love? What didn't you like? What did you buy as a souvenir? Does your souvenir have special significance? Did you notice linguistic accents? Do people speak differently? What makes people different in this place? What do you notice about them in comparison with Romans? What is worse? What is better? What are your thoughts, reflections, opinions, etc.?

The other task was to include, in the cultural portfolio, one's own thoughts and personal interpretation of the visited places with Italian students. This documentation was intended to verify whether the American students had noticed or were able to identify cultural expressions that characterize Italian society. It took them four months (the fourth month was the deadline) to complete the portfolio. It was part of the grade the Food & Culture Program would have assigned at the end of the course. As it was explained from the first day, the worthiness of this creation consists in its usability, its ability to maintain itself even in the future, once the program is over. The creation of an experience portfolio came about after

knowing that many students (of the previous F&C Program) had been able to use it to be accepted as interns or obtain a job. The portfolio that every student brings back home is a tangible proof of the cultural discoveries he/she made during the study abroad experience.

To improve the contents of the documentary videos developed by the American students, it was decided to call in the Italian students during the conception and brainstorming phase. This way the American students could compare their ideas and proposals from the beginning. Initially the enthusiasm that the study abroad students had during the first phase was distracting and a deterrent in the analysis and study of the authenticity issue followed by the cultural analysis of the food. American students were not able to distinguish the real from the unreal simply because they spent most of their free time in the historic centre of Rome which can be considered a really touristic place lacking of the authenticity they are supposed to be looking for.

In order to correct this "inclination," this year, the American students had the opportunity to test their ideas on the Italian students who, like guides, had to show them what was authentic and what was not (that which the former could hardly distinguish being newly arrived foreigners). It represented a two-sided learning experience. While the American students were guided, the Italian students had the chance to practice their language skills trying to express and describe ideas, emotions, places and situations. Simply talking about one's Roman everyday life the two cultural groups established a contact.

On one hand there was curiosity stimulating the Americans to find original themes that afterwards would have been developed and improved until, sometimes, they would change completely. The chosen theme represented the basis to create and build a video narration that was an emblem of a conscious analysis full of cultural interests. On the other hand the Italian students, for the first time out of the university environment (professors, exams and lectures), had to use and prove their own linguistic skills to talk about a contest, their life—something really familiar to them—which at the end transformed itself in the satisfaction of being able to hold a conversation, even though a basic one.



## Project Phases

### Phase I: Structured Phase

When both groups were asked, right after midterms, to fill out some evaluation forms their feedback was not positive at all. On one hand American students blamed the Italian students for always being late, unable to speak fluent and correct English useful to the project, incapable of finding, in a reasonable amount of time, any answer to their questions, and lacking organizational and logistical instincts. Moreover they complained about Italian students' working methods (considered catastrophic) that affected the results of the whole project. This added to a complete lack of organization and meeting arrangements, among the students.

On the other hand Italian students blamed the Americans for being too strict for what concerned their schedule (being never available), due to a constant involvement in their "American" social life which led them to travel around Europe and not dedicate themselves enough to the Cartoline Project (without having any concern for the possible negative evaluations or credits that could have compromised their final mark).

The main obstacle between the two groups was the language barrier. One of the main problems was that most of the American students did not speak Italian at all. This is one of the reasons why organization and communication was so hard.

Fears of both groups showed the following (evaluation form results):

1. Fear of not finishing the project for the arranged deadline (because of the other group's mistakes); this would have inevitably led to a fear of not getting the credits and marks expected.
2. Fear of being blamed, for a hypothetical negative outcome of the project, because of the other group's mistakes.
3. Fear of not being able to communicate clearly. Both groups had not really applied themselves (during the first phase of the project) to create a collaboration. They took for granted that issue, thinking that an interaction between one another would be easy. The intercultural aspect they had to face was veiled both by organizational and management problems—which they would have overcome, as we will see afterwards, during the second phase of the project.
4. Fear of not being able to collaborate and cooperate successfully in one's own group (not knowing each other they would feel the lack of cohesion among them).

### Phase II: Collection of Materials

During this phase all the documentation was collected during group meetings, previously organized by each student. For a whole month every meeting and going out was not managed by the school, but by the students; the only contact the school kept was to control and inform them about their deadlines. While American students had to hand in their video project, Italian ones had to hand in their videos, descriptions and audios for the Cartoline Project.

### Phase III: Final Results

During this phase the students had to collect and create a presentation of their outcomes. This represented the turning point of the whole project because the students realized how much they had improved, both in their cultural immersion and the results they had achieved. The most evident achievement was represented, obviously, by their knowledge of language that implied a deeper capacity of thinking and expressing oneself in a different language. It also improved the organizational aspect of this challenge: being able to arrange one's own (and team's) plans and schedule (making them match with those of the whole project group). This was the main "fear" that this program wanted to overcome and it succeeded.

### Phase IV: Outcomes

Regarding the real outcomes of the project, the following paragraphs illustrate the main results.

The Italian students, motivated by their will of getting all the credits for their work, completed their Cartoline Project collecting videos, pictures and information about those "unconventional" places which are not the primary destination of mass tourism. From an intercultural experimentation point of view it is really interesting to stress that right after the first phase, full of difficulties (also concerning the integration of the two groups) due to the organization of meetings, the students had begun to overcome all these problems during the "free" phase (previously mentioned). It was during the un-scheduled time that the students started to share going out nights apart from the project meetings. They were sheer hanging-outs, which gave them the possibility to strengthen the cultural integration and curiosity on both sides. This transformation can be seen through an analysis of the American students' final evaluations filled out

at the end of the study abroad program in which, if compared to those of 2010, there are no complaints or disappointments for not having the chance to get to know Italian people.

Those of the program spring 2011, in their final evaluations, wanted to stress how significant the "getting in touch with Italian students" part was in order to understand the reality in which they live, even though at the beginning a different cultural background could seem hard to understand. The American students filled out another type of form too, where they had to answer some questions about the Italian students, giving their own opinion about each person considering a) his/her linguistic skills and b) how much he/she was interested both in the program and in the interaction with the American students.

What came out of the evaluation can be easily understood: the language barrier is not so important. The fear of not being able to communicate and interact can be overcome. Their comments make it clear how much the American students were surprised to see a constant growing interest and will to spend some time and share things with the Italians. In order to render these comments about Italian students more concrete and tangible here are some examples:

- "Very willing to help. Really wanted to get to know us. Put a lot of effort in this"
- "She was wonderful. I learned a lot from her"
- "Picked good spot to take me to"
- "Very enthusiastic and eager to meet with us to help us"
- "Amazing, talks with us weekly, helped us a lot with our projects"
- "Great guy, really tried to know us"

These are the results we hoped to achieve: a message that transmits pleasure on both sides of discovering the other, a new culture that at the beginning seemed so different and unreachable.

The Cultural Portfolios ("Italy is not so bad") completed by the American students, were very original and the students enriched their explanations with anecdotes and information coming from informal chats and from the exchange of opinions with Italian students. What was interesting was that the portfolios were very food-oriented: the students understood how to explore the wine and food cultures of places different from Rome, trying to go deeply into the habits and preferences of the inhabitants. Through the connection with the Italian students, this passage was easier and more natural, as is it possible to point out from their commentaries and photos showing alimentary habits in their portfolios. Food was considered as a means, practice and subject for their conversation with Italians: for sharing opinions, thoughts, doubts and

comments. A secondary, but most interesting result coming from the portfolio project, came from the elements and the statistics of the trips made by the students of the Food & Culture program: comparing the data of 2010 with that of 2011, it appears that on 15 weeks, only 3 weekends were dedicated to trips out of Italy, while the others were spent in the exploration of Italian places, with the introduction of locations like Sicily, Lucca, San Gimignano, Lecce, Ariccia and Frascati, never considered as destinations by the previous editions of the program. To make a comparison, in 2010 the students, with 15 weeks available, had used 9 of them to explore foreign cities and regions (Amsterdam, Barcelona, Prague and Paris are the main ones, but they were followed by Switzerland, Germany and United Kingdom) and only 2 of them were used to see Italy—that is, Venice and Florence, as the most visited cities—while the places surrounding Rome were not explored at all.

The Video projects (food and culture documentaries) designed and edited by the American students were very fascinating in the Spring 2011 program. American students had suggested their own screenplay ideas to the Italian students from the first meeting. The factor that helped give great results was the honest approach of Italian students who freely commented on the video proposals of the Illinois students, judging them interesting or not. The American students trusted them in a very flexible way and they refined their choices, and even identified the themes on which they based their projects. The switch from the starting proposal to the final media project is worthy of attention.

Initially Group A had proposed, as the subject of inquiry, pizza as a typical Italian food. After having worked with the Italian students, the subject evolved to "restaurant industry and use of market fresh food" in the restaurants in Rome. Everything started from the basic analysis of the fact that American students asked themselves where all the ingredients used by the restaurants in Rome came from: Why were they so fresh? Where were they purchased? And the second question concerned the markets, the street markets distinguishing the Italian culture: Who went to the markets? Through interviews of important chefs in Rome and the exploration of the street market, the students touched upon and studied very interesting subjects in order to define the Italian food and culture that are the seasonality, the freshness and the market of the Latium territory, apart from the restoration industry.

Group B had started to work on a project about *bruschetta*, as an Italian alimentary habit. The evolution of the theme started when the students, confronting with the Italians, realized that the latter could all cook and prepare the recipes their mothers had taught to them. *Bruschetta*

as an "always present" starter on the tables of their Italian contemporaries helped produce a documentary about the subject of family and family dynamics in the Italian tradition and cuisine. As a matter of fact, the final documentary was made of two interviews: on one hand to the owner of a family restaurant that from 50 years maintains the culinary traditions of his father; on the other hand the documentary analyzed the family traditions of an Italian household and how people preserve a strong historical memory on their culinary Italian roots, regardless of where they move. The students were able to understand that Italian food and culture derives from the inheritance received from ancestors.

Initially Group C had proposed an idea about the concept of *aperitivo* as a new Italian food and culture trend. Talking with the Italian students, they developed—from a very simple observation that in Italy, water is not served at tables, but it is charged—an interesting and rich documentary on water privatization, a theme of topic and public interest currently in Italy.

What is clear from these explanations is that the Illinois students had started for their projects with a very superficial and observer approach (to order a pizza at the restaurant, reading *bruschetta* in every menu of every Roman restaurant, using *aperitivo* as a cheap substitute of a dinner), but that, thanks to the interaction with local people of the same age, and from their observations, they have settled on research projects and documentaries able to describe genuinely aspects of Italian wine and food culture, and thus the authenticity of a different culture.

### Phase V: Presentation of the Results

The Cartoline Project was presented, in two languages, during an event that intended to unite American and Italian students. Italian students talked about what places they chose in front of an audience (which included their official professors). They reasoned their choices and why they produced and elaborated their documentation in a certain way. American students pointed out some strengths and weaknesses of the project with respect to the communication between the two cultural groups. At the end they added some comments, acknowledgements and judgments concerning each Italian student involved in the program.

The Illinois students' portfolios became one of the student evaluation devices. Each student received some credits from the Food & Culture course, both for their portfolio and the food related comments, which it contained.

At the final event of the study abroad program the three documentaries were shown. They were sent to the American university in order to be

used, now and in the future, for the education of those students interested in food and culture issues.

## Food Related Intercultural Communication

### Food-Related Questionnaire

Before returning to their home campus, students were asked to fill out one last form in order to understand their thoughts about food as a cultural product and mediator, which had been a pivotal point in the program and for their cultural integration in Italy. The questionnaire aimed to find out whether the students saw food as the main device for their cultural immersion or if it had simply been something to be studied and tasted to get to know the "Roman diet" experienced through dinners out and supermarket visits. Last but not least the questionnaire wanted to know how American students would use this experience and new acquired food knowledge once back in the United States.

Their answers have been clustered in various categories. The following is a summary.

To the first question "After this cultural experience in Rome, food helped me to..." only three out of thirty-two students answered talking about food as an ingredient, that is a component of a diet and the Italian way of eating. They said:

- "I have learned about the Mediterranean diet"
- "I have enjoyed the taste and their way of eating slower than us"
- "I have gained weight"

Some students (twelve out of thirty-two) answered they considered food as a "personal" element, a measure, to take into consideration when confronting and analyzing another culture. They said that food was helpful for them because:

- "I have tried new things and met new people"
- "I have experienced new things"
- "It made me better understand the food meaning in my country"
- "It made me engage in interpersonal communication with new friends on my program"
- "I associate now food with memories and friends of the cultural experiences"
- "It made me simply understand"

It is evident that their own personality and life is present, but that food works as a connector between them and the new experience. In addition it is really interesting to notice how most of the students stressed the cultural aspect of the food, how it made them interact and get closer to the other culture more easily. During their stay in Rome food represented a sort of answer or keystone and they wanted to state it in their questionnaire.

The same questions were asked in the 2010 final evaluations. Not even one student answered that food had represented for him/her something useful for the cultural interaction. In the Spring 2011 evaluation, students answered that food helped them to:

- "Interact easily with native people and immerse in the new culture"
- "Experience culture"
- "Learn about customs of other places"
- "Understand how citizens interact with one another"
- "Understand the culture and habits of everyday life"
- "Experience another culture and get a better feel for their ways of living"

In the same cluster we can also be find the personal and inner growth due to the cultural interaction (not necessarily due to the encounter with other people) with food. They said that food helped them out to:

- "Grow more responsible..."
- "Embrace life"
- "Connect to my Italian heritage"
- "Enjoy life, broaden my horizons"
- "To be integrated in the Italian lifestyle"
- "Assimilate a new culture"

The second question asked them to give their own definition of food. Due to a lack of space this article will show the most common definitions given. Food was considered as:

- "Good way to interact"
- "Medium to interact"
- "Social medium"

They also wrote some definitions, which viewed the food from a pedagogic point of view, and they should not be ignored:

- "Food is a Central meeting point"
- "Food is a Common ground"
- "Food is a Great way"
- "Food is a Pathway"

- "Food is a collaborative and helpful force"
- "Food is a Gateway"

The third part of the questionnaire was dedicated to food as an academic subject. The students had attended for four months a study program dedicated to the history and culture of food in Italy. The program included both practical and theoretical classes for a total of 40 hours, including exams and quizzes to check their progress. The evaluation asked how useful this kind of program about food could be positive for their learning process and for their future life.

Fourteen out of thirty-two students answered in this way:

- "Interact"
- "Relate"
- "Connect"
- "Associate"
- "Interact and get to know"
- "Communicate"
- "Relate and communicate better"
- "Enjoy interacting"

Among the answers, very interesting for our research, are the following ones:

- "Appreciate what I put in my mouth everyday"
- "Appreciate the freshness of the ingredients"
- "Understand foreigners"
- "Understand the meaning and passion that goes into making the product allowing me to bond with foreigners"
- "Have more to talk about with foreigners"
- "Understand origins of food rather than just eat it"
- "See the family traditions"

It is underlined how through the practical, theoretical and so-called curricular knowledge of food, Illinois students believed they had learned important content that can influence their daily life in the States. They also valued the fact of being able to tell their tastes, preferences and choices to others, on the basis of knowledge and experiences developed in a practical or theoretical way in Italy. Food became a medium, but especially a subject of conversation and interaction with others: this happened in the "exploration time" such as in the study abroad program, but even after the

students returned to the U.S. We asked the students what they would use the food for when back home and they answered:

- "To express the importance of family to the others"
- "To interact with friends, family and boyfriend"
- "To share my study abroad experience"
- "To educate other people"
- "To have more social interactions"
- "To give tips to the other"
- "To socialize, to start to chat with other people"
- "To impress my friends and my family"
- "To entertain"
- "To meet and speak catch up"
- "To communicate"

These are only few of the answers given by the students. They are all very similar and they represent a shared feeling. Food has become a great subject of conversation, a way of interacting, but above all of expressing yourself in a collective and social context.

### Conclusion

Three "experiences" of approaching food can be listed:

- a) The personal cognitive one (first experience, direct exploration). It occurs socially, when we go to a restaurant we do not know and we read the menu: we have to choose the dish we like the most, but we do not know enough about the ingredients, nor do we have a precise idea of the tastes. Eventually we rely on external help, friends or the waiter, or we try by ourselves. This experimental approach is what study abroad consists of, where the students come in contact for the first time to a foreign culture.
- b) The curricular one (through the subject of study: food and culture, food and media, Italian history and society, Italian language and culture)
- c) The interactive one, where the sharing and the exchange of information, knowledge, collective and individual stories become the cultural background of the students. The authentic intercultural interaction has enabled the students to gain confidence and such a background so as to allow them to use the knowledge acquired when they are back in the States. According to Lisa Sasson's 2007 research about the change of alimentary habits of study abroad program students, it results that the only alimentary habits actually modified after study abroad concern those where the students are able to transfer their knowledge to others, or that related to the possibility of sharing "knowledge about food" in a convivial

situation: for instance, it follows that students drink more wine, because when they go in a bar or a wine bar they are able to express their opinions and to explain to others how to taste wine. So likewise, they eat more vegetables and fresh products when they have the possibility of teaching their family, friends and roommates advantages and strategies of following a balanced diet.

Teaching, talking, knowing how to use your knowledge to interact is the real goal of every study abroad program aiming at an immersion in the host society, with a resulting growth in intercultural competence.

As we have seen in the first part of the article, American students have great difficulty in approaching another culture, first of all because they live in extreme tourist cities oriented to the short-term visitor, secondly because they live more an American life on the Italian soil rather than aiming at a progressive and natural integration with natives of the same age. The reasons have been already defined. Study abroad programs developed in the last years are very sophisticated and extremely interesting in helping the student to immerse himself/herself into the culture and interact with the host society, but unfortunately the market logic, the rules shaping the marketing of study abroad education and the already high prices of extracurricular activities have as a result the impossibility of investing in projects dedicated to communication and cultural interaction.

In this article we are simply giving some tips and advice to professors and study abroad directors: starting a project with Italian universities requires time, adaptability of both schedules and a huge expenditure of human resources. Interaction between Italian and American students, especially if educational projects are included, is neither simple nor to be taken for granted, as we have seen in the case study.

The case study of this paper presents how a Food & Culture Program can produce interesting results in terms of exploration and cultural immersion, so long as it is bound together by good interaction and cultural communication. The short term results are already clear from the evaluation forms taken by the students and from the final results, the long term ones require a longer period of observation and will be determined in the future.

### Notes

- 1 For an example see "Spanish Steps Pub Crawl - Rome's Ultimate Party" [www.pubcrawlrome.com](http://www.pubcrawlrome.com). Accessed 28 June, 2011. <<http://www.pubcrawlrome.com>>
- 2 For an example see "Collaborazione Tra ESN Italia E Ryanair" [www.esnitalia.org](http://www.esnitalia.org). Accessed 26 June, 2011. <<http://www.esnitalia.org/article/collaborazione-tra-esnitalia>>

- e-ryanair?>
3. See "UC San Diego Study Abroad Alumni Survey" <http://icenter.ucsd.edu/about/publications/index.html> Accessed June 16 2011.
  4. See "Studying Abroad in Europe: Off the Beaten Path." Web log post. University Language Services - Student Guides, Certified Translation and Resume Writing. <http://www.universitylanguage.com/>, 25 May 2011. Accessed 28 July, 2011.
  5. See Romeing - Free Press Lifestyle Magazine Devoted to Rome. Accessed 27 June, 2011. <<http://www.romeing.it/en/>>
  6. See online "Global Study Magazine," 2011. <http://www.globalstudymagazine.com/site/articles/504/>.
  7. See Studyabroad.com 1995-2011.
  8. [http://www.studyabroad.com/programs/learn\\_italian\\_in\\_authentic\\_tuscany.aspx](http://www.studyabroad.com/programs/learn_italian_in_authentic_tuscany.aspx). See Atti del Seminario I Rituali del Cibo: il Valore del Cibo e del Digiuno nelle Diverse Culture, 33-34. Commissione Europea DGXXH. Ministero Pubblica Istruzione Provincia di Bologna. Atti del Seminario: i Rituali del Cibo: il Valore del Cibo e del Digiuno nelle Diverse Culture. Accessed July 15, 2011. (<http://www.comune.bologna.it/media/files/apriltissamo.pdf>).
  9. See Consiglio Territoriale per l'Immigrazione. Le Spezie nella Cucina del Mondo. 5a Festa Multietnica, June 7, 2006. Consiglio Territoriale per l'Immigrazione. Cultura e Intercultura. [http://www.piemontimmigrazione.it/site/images/stories/newsletter/documenti\\_31/7Cultura\\_e\\_intercultura.pdf](http://www.piemontimmigrazione.it/site/images/stories/newsletter/documenti_31/7Cultura_e_intercultura.pdf). Accessed June 16, 2011.
  10. See website of the Region of Tuscany - Quaderni di Porto Franco. <http://www.cultura.toscana.it/spettacolo/progetti/progetti2005/portofranco2005.shtml> Accessed July 15, 2011.
  11. See "Know My World." <http://knowmyworld.org/exchange-options/food-and-nutrition-exchange/>. Accessed July 15, 2011.
  12. See "Food and Games for Cultural Exchange." SEED. 20 June 2011. Accessed July 15, 2011. <http://www.seedlearn.org/2011/06/20/food-and-games-for-cultural-exchange/>
  13. See "La Cucina Multietnica." Ristorante La Tua Esperienza. Accessed 15 June 2011. <http://www.ristorante.it/articoli/ricette-cucina-multietnica-cibo-internazionale-ristorante-etnico-piattimultietnici-locali.html>
  14. See "Osservazioni e Suggerimenti degli Studenti Formati durante la Compilazione dei Test di Valutazione dei Corsi \* I SEMESTRE A.A. 2007/08." <http://www.cla.uniroma3.it/www/Attach/Questionario/valutativo-commenti-aa-07-08-I-semester.pdf>. 10

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