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Introduction to Special Issue on *Study Abroad During COVID and Beyond*

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The COVID-19 pandemic, starting in March 2020, disrupted all phases of the education system, including the study of world languages. As a result of global travel restrictions prompted by the pandemic, study abroad (SA) and foreign language exchanges experienced a widespread curtailment—and, in many cases, a complete cancellation (see Basterretxea & Sanz, this issue). Some university programs sought to mitigate these COVID disruptions with online classes and, in some cases, even a virtual study abroad option carried out entirely from home. Only recently have SA programs begun to reopen abroad, but often with severe restrictions concerning the scope of social interactions in response to continuing and unpredictable local health concerns. Undoubtedly, some of these online components will become a permanent feature of SA in whatever new iteration of SA emerges in the future. Clearly, the new normal will end up looking very different from the old SA ways, with health concerns coming to the forefront.

More specifically, the pandemic's most intense phase undermined the social dimension of SA, the principal avenue by which students explore and incorporate elements of a new culture and second language (L2) into their own ever-evolving identities; Kramsch (1993) has defined this process as finding a *third place*, a personal space uniquely situated somewhere in between an idealized L1 and L2 competency and membership. Going forward now, the process of reestablishing a safe and positive social environment for SA requires careful reflection and attention.

In this special issue of the *L2 Journal*, we examine what adjustments were made in SA programs at the height of the pandemic, including the supporting role digital technologies played in response to health-related confinements, and then imagine future directions for SA. The contributions to this issue review current SA approaches and examine how the curriculum is adapting in response to this public health crisis. To that end, it must be remembered that there are at least four constituencies to any SA enterprise: the students, the program leaders/teachers, the administrators, and the local communities. In this volume, we try to give voice to the first three, realizing that the local communities present a heterogeneous and, for the most part, mostly impenetrable group from which to gather generalizable data. The present

collection of studies offers up palpable evidence of the pandemic's toll on SA language programs through both quantitative and qualitative insights, as well as thoughtful reflections concerning the major trends in the SA field during the COVID crisis and beyond. The data represented here were primarily collected from students traveling to countries in which Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Russian, and Spanish are spoken.

Understandably, the SA programs referred to here differ from one another with respect to their goals, length of stay, community integration, and the amount of L2 use required. One size no longer fits all in the SA field in these contemporary times. The traditional *junior-year abroad* (a frequent target of postcolonial criticism for its embrace of idealized national portraits), with its heavy focus on literature and cultural history, now represents only a small fraction of the total SA programs (3.5%; see Nyitray, this issue), with short-term offerings—a summer- or semester-long program—dominating the scene, very often with the content being delivered in English (i.e., English-Medium Instruction, EMI). The trend toward EMI offerings opens SA up to a larger and more diverse student audience at the expense of the traditional foreign language curriculum. Nevertheless, students enrolled in EMI programs often develop an appreciation for the importance of learning world languages (see Nyitray, this issue), as reflected in the comments cited below from one summer SA participant in Spain enrolled in an EMI program focused on the Muslim presence during the medieval period (700-1492).

While I have felt intimidated interacting with Spaniards because I lack the language skills, I am highly motivated to continue learning and perfecting my Spanish, even more so from being a part of this program. I believe it's crucial for everyone to be exposed to as many languages and cultures as possible so that change on a global scale could be possible. (Blake, personal communication).

In the present context for SA, both American students and host-country participants find themselves struggling to come to grips with new definitions and concerns for diversity, equity, and inclusion— notions whose meanings are not universally shared or responded to in the same way around the globe. In the best of all possible scenarios, SA programs are *transformative* for the students (see Davidson & Garas, this issue; Leaver & Campbell, this issue), coaxing them out of their well-trodden thought patterns, stereotypes, and rigid mind-sets—a loss of naivete, one might say, for these young adults—in favor of recognizing a more complex, but more accurate view of the other, the world, and their own respective place in it. In the words of another student from the same above-mentioned summer program in Spain, SA is a life-changing experience:

This course has changed my view of the world and has made me believe that *convivencia* ("living together") is a difficult state to obtain when greed, ego and political hierarchy are involved. (Blake, personal communication).

Nevertheless, the pandemic has reminded us all too well that we really do live in an interconnected world; what happens in relatively unknown parts of the world will impact us all. No person, no country is an island. Catastrophic climate changes, as well as the economic and humanitarian havoc caused by world events, such as the invasion of Ukraine, have reinforced our collective sense that learning about the *other* is a necessity, not a luxury. Accordingly, interest in SA has not and should not disappear, as illustrated by the studies published here, although health concerns now decidedly enter more into the equation for those desiring to go abroad. History, language study, and intercultural competence (ICC) all

constitute areas of knowledge that are not supplanted by single-minded professional career paths—but the arguments in favor of SA will need to appeal to something more than just being a fringe benefit of a liberal arts education.

Although the authors in this issue come from different generations and theoretical backgrounds, they all have participated directly in SA programs and are dedicated to the idea that SA improves the overall undergraduate curriculum and stimulates intellectual and personal growth. The authors also come from a diverse array of academic institutions: large public universities, small private colleges, government-sponsored programs, as well as those programs overseen by the Department of Defense. Likewise, these 10 studies offer a variety of research methodologies—some quantitative, others qualitative, and still others more reflective in nature—providing valuable insight as to where the field might be going in post-pandemic times or, as Griffin (this issue) suggests, as we move into the *endemic* phase of COVID.

We begin this special issue on SA with two studies that explore the experiences and attitudes of students, the target group for whom SA programs are so carefully designed and executed. In the first article, Basterretxea and Sanz tap student survey data designed to reveal their motivation for study abroad (MSA) during both pre- and post-COVID periods. The principal factor that students cite both before and after the onslaught of the pandemic can be captured by the term *Enlightenment*. Nevertheless, *health concerns* now rank second in front of *personal growth*, *career development*, and *entertainment*. These findings concerning student motivations have significant implications for SA program design, especially for issues dealing with language learning, as we continue to move through and beyond the pandemic.

The second study by Levine-West, Lam and Schaeffer also probes student attitudes from Fall 2021 and Spring 2022, both quantitatively and qualitatively using data from 261 participants in 22 countries' SA programs (a 16% response rate from a total of 1,700 students who received the invitation to respond). The statistics are revealing: 77% of these informants were women; 76% studied in Europe, and 89% were abroad for only one semester or quarter. Their analysis underscores the negative impact caused by the pandemic on the quantity and quality of social interactions. Academic learning and L2 development were negatively affected, too, but to a much lesser degree. Although not everyone enjoyed the increased use of online options, their progress in language learning was not adversely hampered by the digital mode of language delivery during the pandemic, in contrast to the marked decrease in social interactions that all participants suffered. In-person classes with mandated mask wearing were criticized by almost everyone as being less than ideal for L2 learning because the masks interfere with clear pronunciation, which is so crucial for L2 learning. Despite the limitations of online language learning outlined by Levine-West, Lam and Schaeffer, virtual SA options appear to provide certain positive results for L2 development, as demonstrated in more detail by the next two studies.

The following study by Sonia Shiri comes directly from teaching in the trenches during this health crisis, when all travel to and from foreign countries was banned. The Arabic program at the University of Arizona (UA), which includes a large portion of federally funded students not part of the UA, was unable to send any of its students abroad during the pandemic to their site in Meknes, Morocco. Nevertheless, the organizers revamped their entire Arabic curriculum (with their own UA students also forced to stay at home and study remotely), taking advantage of the Zoom platform to carry out in real time culture clubs (music, cooking, and calligraphy), virtual visits to places in Morocco that included spontaneous exchanges with people on the streets, and guest lectures with experts. The activities were designed to be as interactive as possible and help make up for the loss of direct face-to-face interactions that are normally an integral part of study abroad. Shiri documented the student responses to these virtual cultural activities—mostly positive—and went on to suggest that similar exercises

should be a regular part of any study abroad program, both as a preparation to go abroad as well as during the SA experience. In any event, the UA Arabic program was able to maintain student interest and even motivate language study in this unique fashion.

In their study of proficiency gains, Davidson and Garas compare the language development of Arabic, Chinese, and Russian L2 students studying abroad in person before the pandemic against the results from online learning performed at home during the height of the pandemic. The sample size alone speaks to the reliability of their results: 1,388 students learning in person, along with 780 students using the online mode for the SA programs administered by the American Councils for International Education. Across these three languages, the online group consistently lagged one ACTFL OPI level behind the traditional in-person SA learners with respect to oral proficiency gains. These researchers cite some probable causes for the poorer gains exhibited by the online learners: screen fatigue, fewer hours on task, time-zone conflicts, and less social interactions. Nevertheless, the difference in L2 gains is only slightly worse than the traditional delivery mode. As might be expected, traditional SA participants also improved markedly more on the Intercultural Development Index (IDI) than did online L2 learners, but the authors caution us that the sample size was very small ($N = 26$ for in-person; $N = 12$ for online). In contrast, the ACTFL proficiency gap was less severe and sometimes non-existent between these two groups in the case of reading, listening, and writing measures. On a more positive note, the prerecorded or flipped-classroom lectures struck a popular chord with the online students, and the authors suggest this component of online learning should become a permanent feature of future SA programs.

In the next study, Kennedy Terry introduces the concept of social network analysis (SNA) and explains how this framework can be used to quantify student social interactions during their stay abroad. The goal here is to explain L2 development, especially the acquisition of target-language (TL) accents and dialectal features, as a function of the students' respective involvement with the local TL community. The SNA methodology has been adapted from Milroy and Milroy's (1985) classic sociolinguistic model of social networks, along with the use of variable rules (i.e., probabilistic statistics) to track the L2 development for certain vernacular language features. The author's review of the literature includes a brief description of her own study of L2 French students who adopted certain colloquial features—such as subject pronoun *l*-reduction [il > i'] and monosyllabic object pronoun schwa deletion [mə > m']—in response to the intensity or density of their respective SA networks. Since most SA research highlights the central importance of social interactions, this SNA approach, especially as its use becomes more refined, offers great promise as a way of empirically documenting students' growing investment in the TL culture. Although the social interaction dimension of SA was put on pause during the pandemic, SNA or some similar line of inquiry should inform the future phases of international education.

The following contribution from Morris illustrates how pragmatics—i.e., the knowledge of what to say, when, and to whom—can and should be included as part of a SA L2 curriculum. Morris supports this argument with evidence from two studies of L2 pragmatic competence and development among Spanish learners both at home and abroad. In her first study, she points out the limited pragmatic competence demonstrated by seemingly advanced L2 learners nearing completion of their Spanish program at home, highlighting the advantages that SA programs offer with respect to access to varied social contexts. The second study compares the pragmatic competence and development of three groups of students: one abroad with task-based pragmatics instruction, one abroad with no pragmatics instruction, and one at home with no pragmatics instruction. Not surprisingly, the students at home made no significant gains in pragmatic development, whereas the two groups abroad did. However, the

group abroad that received explicit instruction demonstrated the highest pragmatic competence, clearly illustrating the importance of teaching L2 pragmatics in a SA program. Because pragmatic competence provides the linguistic and cultural foundations that students need to engage and interact successfully with members of the local community, Morris argues for pragmatics as a central part of any SA language curriculum.

We have already mentioned Davidson and Garas' study, which examined SA as a *transformative* experience from the perspective of the student. In a similar vein, Leaver and Campbell in this next article set out to explain how teachers and administrators can construct a transformative SA curriculum. Both these studies rely heavily on Mezirow's (2012) notions of resolving *disorienting dilemmas*—social and psychological conflicts, such as what SA students routinely experience during their time abroad, with or without the complication of COVID. They resolve these conflicts by reflecting and changing their previous mindsets in order to diminish the gap between personal expectations and the realities presented by real-world encounters. Leaver and Campbell offer a series of guidelines for implementing a Transformative Language Learning and Teaching (TLLT) approach that relies on real-world materials and empowers the learner by means of an Open Architecture Curriculum Design (OACD). The TLLT/OACD approach encompasses other well-known pedagogical techniques such as content-based learning, task-based learning, project-based learning, and community-based learning. Those SA programs with a service component also fit neatly into their vision of a well-designed TLLT model. Leaver and Campbell end their study by citing several government SA programs that exemplify TLLT best practices: for example, the Flagship Program, the French War College, and the NovaMova Russian program in Kyiv.

In the following article, Quan, Diao and Trentman reflect on the ideologies that should underlay curricular goals for SA programs by stressing values such as diversity, equity, and inclusion. They begin by pointing out that 70% of SA participants are non-Hispanic whites. They take issue with viewing SA as a culminating or pinnacle experience for the language major. More specifically, they reject ideologies that sing the praises of monolingual immersion, global citizenship preparation, educational tourism, and personal growth. They suggest several remedies that deemphasize the necessity of crossing national borders, leverage the benefits of translanguaging (i.e., the use of both L1 and L2 in academic settings), and assure the affordability and inclusiveness for all language learners alike. Despite not knowing just how many SA programs adhere to their characterizations, seeking greater minority representation—and, by the same token, more male participation, given that Levine-West, Lam and Schaeffer (this issue) reported that 77% of their informants were women—should be a goal supported by all SA programs. As the authors note, certain online components will undoubtedly help implement some of these suggested ideological changes in SA goals.

The last two studies in this special issue come from two SA administrators, one based abroad in Spain and the other in the California public university system. Griffin administers the SA program for the University of Cordoba, Spain, which recruits from private universities and colleges on the east coast. She notes with a modicum of optimism that SA programs have already withstood the first two-year onslaught of the pandemic with remarkable patience, flexibility, resilience, and financial robustness. She gives us a detailed account of the adjustments her SA programs had to make during the height of health restrictions, which gave rise to more *place-based learning*; simply explained, since students could not travel on the weekends, they were forced to explore their local ecology and, consequently, arrived at a deeper knowledge of their immediate surroundings and TL community. In practical terms, more time was spent with the host families, more time walking and observing *in situ*, all of which generated a special place-based cultural experience. From an administrator's point of

view, the pandemic forced programmatic decisions to become the responsibility of both the host and home administration equally, instead of being solely driven by the concerns of the home-university administrators. Griffin refers to this change as *geo-centric* decision-making, a model that should become the new norm in SA.

Nyitray finishes this special issue with a series of cautiously optimistic reflections as to what will constitute the new normal for SA, aptly captured by her subtitle, *I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore*. As director of the University of California's Education Abroad Office (UCEAP), she oversaw the extraction in March 2020 of over 1,000 U.S. students from their SA programs—mostly students not registered in sheltered SA programs and lacking the on-the-spot assistance of any home-institution faculty. Fortunately, the SA numbers have rebounded since then to 3,000 students abroad for the 2022-2023 academic year. Despite 84% of these SA programs being taught in an EMI format, a respectable 48% of the total number of students persist in enrolling in language courses or content courses delivered in the TL. (N.B. Physics and economics are almost exclusively delivered in the EMI mode.) This SA reset, of course, has not been without increased stress due to continuing health concerns and safety incidents. Although SA administrators cannot truly know what this generation of students wants out of their experience abroad, Nyitray encourages SA leaders to use all their professional skills to extend empathy and support for new as well as old concerns of enlightenment, growth, diversity, equity, and inclusion. If we are to form a successful world community ready for the next world-wide pandemic, climate crisis, or catastrophic political event, she exhorts students to look not only outside at the world, but also see it from the outside—ideally while developing world language expertise. In other words, Dorothy may get back to Kansas from Oz, but everything has changed and, accordingly, she is no longer that same person. So true for SA (and Kramersch's *third place* immediately comes to mind).

Finally, the editors, Blake and Morris, will bring this special L2 Journal issue to a close with some final thoughts concerning *quo vadis*, a look at where the SA field is headed. More specifically, they will discuss how the following issues should be addressed by future SA programs.

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

Surely, there are more voices to be heard with respect to moving forward with SA during and beyond COVID, but this special issue will help set the table for an informed discussion of the fundamental issues and guiding SA precepts with an eye to benefiting all respective constituents.

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