Stepping Off the Veranda  
Argentina  
Amherst College  
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http://theverandaproject.weebly.com

Section I

The initial goal for this project was to better understand the challenges U.S. study abroad students face when integrating into local culture when first arriving abroad. I sought to develop a toolkit of activities U.S. study abroad students participate in alongside Argentinian university students during their first three weeks in their host country.

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The project emphasizes the most difficult time in the study abroad transition: orientation. The nerves already present having to adjust to a new culture and environment often leads people to retreat to places and relationships that are familiar: those with other study abroad students. These relationships can become a barrier for thoughtful immersion when they prioritize wanting to be comfortable. My project sought to expose students to the uncomfortable aspects of cross-cultural interaction to help U.S. students confront their discomfort and show it becomes easier to engage deeply with practice.

Through interviews with eight study abroad students from the semester prior to the project’s launch, four Argentine mentors of international students, and three members of study abroad provider and local university staff, I concluded that one’s integration into local culture dramatically increases once you form friendships with local residents. In general, U.S. study abroad students arrived in Argentina with the goal of improving their Spanish, excited to take advantage of living with a host family and integrating into local culture. The Argentine mentors who chose to participate either had their own international exchange experience that they felt passionately about or expressed a desire to help others. My conversations with program staff gave me insight into the range of cultural differences U.S. students and other international students encounter when arriving in Argentina and how these differences impact their transition to the host country. For example, U.S. study abroad students get easily frustrated with the unpredictability of daily life in Argentina. My assessment led me to conclude that in general, U.S. students benefit from some form of encouragement and structure to step out of their comfort zone and continually lean into the uncertainty that Argentina brings. Meanwhile, service providers such as IFSA-Butler carefully try and walk the line of being a guide to U.S. students who pay for the additional support but while also ensuring that all experiences in Argentina are not handed to students on a platter.

The toolkit I designed features activities that promote intercultural friendship making as a way of providing encouragement while aligning with the existing study abroad model. The toolkit focused on introducing students to activities that are particularly meaningful in Argentina as social experiences. At the same time, they resonate with social customs in other cultures as well, inciting a sense of familiarity.

- **Activity 1: Human Bingo and Cultural Sharing Over Mate:** Thirty-nine students participated in the icebreaker, which consisted of a “Human Bingo” game and a cultural sharing session while drinking the traditional tea, yerba mate.
- **Activity 2: Mediatarde a la Canasta:** Twenty-three students came together for a potluck snack hour sharing traditional desserts from different cultures.
- **Activity 3: Citywide Scavenger Hunt:** Fifty students participated in a scavenger hunt in mixed teams of Argentine and international students.
Seventeen students responded to surveys evaluating the activities in which they took part. Feedback received was overwhelming positive highlighting the desire to meet other students and the ways the activities introduced them to integral parts of Argentina’s culture (e.g. mate). Following activities that allowed students to come together in small groups, I witnessed students planning events to continue getting together or even planning larger group activities such as watching a sports game all together at a restaurant. Ultimately, the impact of this toolkit cannot be fully evaluated within the first three weeks of the semester. Universidad de Congreso’s Argentine mentors have a loose schedule of events they will be planning with students for the rest of the semester including an International Festival in September. I plan to track engagement and participation throughout the semester and develop evaluation methods for students to complete at the midway point as well as at the semester’s end. I plan to post results on the website I created for my project: http://theverandaproject.weebly.com. Challenges included navigating administrative systems and processes to find the right “home” for my pilot and figuring out the best strategy for scheduling and promoting events to maximize participation.

Section II

As I reflect on my project, John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s definition of peace resonates strongly. He says, “peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures.” My focus on building intercultural friendships addresses peace in this very manner. The process of forming and nurturing a friendship entails acknowledging prejudices, changing opinions, and slowly forming bonds born from shared concern and understanding for another. Though my toolkit has concluded, I am confident the students who first connected during these activities will continue to bond and learn about one another. I envision peace spreading as friendships form across cultural difference and people begin to think differently and more fondly about the places where their friends come from. Ultimately, my goal is for students who may feel guarded when first arriving in their host culture to leave my pilot program with tools to relate to local Argentine students. Their understanding of important Argentinian social experiences signal to other students that they are excited to interact and engage. I look forward to tracking the progress of these students over the course of the semester.

This project has made me think about the internal challenges U.S. study abroad students face when integrating into a culture that is not their own. I continue to question how much of the difficulty is due to being placed in a new and ambiguous environment and how much is based on personal disposition to embrace change. Short term, this project touched the lives of U.S. study abroad students, Argentine university students, and international students representing countries from around the world enhancing the impact I could create. Additionally, Universidad de Congreso now holds the framework to replicate this orientation program. On behalf of the university, Mobility Coordinator Romina González provided me with positive feedback saying, “I would like to emphasize that the activities organized by you will help to strengthen the ties and the international cooperation relations between exchange students and the national students of any participating country.”

As I watched students nervously and shyly begin the semester and saw them begin forming bonds and opening up over the three weeks that I ran my toolkit, I thought of the ways they would continue to grow and change over the course of the semester. This project reaffirms my belief in the importance of international education and integration into a host culture and how it widens one’s worldview.

Sophie Delfeus: This project serves as a starting point to reviving authentic engagement in study abroad and disrupting its marketization. Projects for Peace allowed me gain an in-depth look at the challenges and committed me to finding a solution.