

Developing U.S. Students' Skills in Communication Research Through Ethnographies of Speech in Different London Settings

In 2012, faculty from the School of Communications at Grand Valley State University developed an undergraduate research program designed to promote learning-by-doing through study abroad. I now serve as the director of the program, which sends students to London, England, for six weeks each summer for training in data gathering and interpretation. I am both the course instructor and a research mentor for the students who accept the challenge of traveling abroad to conduct ethnographies of speech patterns used in various settings within one of the world's biggest and busiest cities. The students gain valuable insights into the complex relationship between culture and communication while practicing skills for conducting effective and ethical research.

Grand Valley State University is a large regional, public university in West Michigan. With a focus on liberal education, the university serves more than 21,000 undergraduates in 86 degree programs. Most students are in-state residents (91.9 percent), and many cite proximity to home as a key consideration in enrolling. Many students also hold full or part-time jobs while taking classes, and almost 40 percent of Grand Valley students are the first in their families to go to college. These features of the student population pose challenges for students' retention and time-to-graduation and contribute to the university's desire to emphasize and expand high-impact practices that engage and inspire undergraduates academically. Undergraduate research opportunities are one example of a high-impact practice.

In the School of Communications at Grand Valley, students complete a series of courses in communication theory, statistics, and research methods before completing a primary course-based research project. This approach follows the advice of scholars such as Jenny Olin Shanahan (2011), who highlights the importance of scaffolding research in a curriculum in order to integrate a student's academic knowledge and to prepare students for the research experience. Students from the eight undergraduate majors in the School of Communications share these course requirements and, as a result, the diversity of perspectives in the classroom contributes to creative thinking about research. Students from advertising and public relations, broadcasting, communication studies, film and video production, health communication, journalism, photography, and theatre join in conversation about approaches to studying the complexity of human communication.

Faculty members teaching the research course are asked to

give students advanced training in a methodology used in their own specialty and to mentor students through application of that method to a communication context of the student's choice. I offered to teach a section of the course focused on the ethnography of speaking. In this approach, anthropologists, linguists, and communication scholars, following the work of Dell Hymes (1962),

employ ethnographic techniques in order to "observe patterns of communication, and the symbols and meanings, and premises, and rules applied to speaking within specific groups of people" (Fitch 2001, 57). By identifying speech communities, their ways of speaking, and their native terms for talk, students who conduct ethnographies of speaking are able to explore the complexity of language use (both verbal and nonverbal, words and images) as they emerge in cultural practice. Students come to understand how the communicative resources used by individuals in a society reflect relationships, economic status, political practice, and other social structures. Researching communication through ethnographies of speaking can advance students' understanding of the discipline, and also increase their cultural awareness, sensitivity, and understanding.

Yet despite the benefits, I have found that guiding students to complete ethnographies on-campus is quite challenging. While students enjoyed reading ethnographic reports and were enthusiastic about research, it was difficult to achieve much deep learning about communication and culture because the students are part of a relatively homogenous population, and they lack easy access and time during the semester to explore another speech community. Students often defaulted to ethnographies of themselves and their families



Student Brittany Wakefield prepares to interview tourists near St. Paul's Cathedral.

or their student organizations, which devolved into shallow self-reflection rather than nuanced interpretation. Further, if I lacked prior knowledge of the community of interest, my feedback was less developed than students deserved.

Designing Research Opportunities Through Study Abroad

Thus, School of Communications' faculty supported a bold proposal to pilot the research-practice course as a short-term study-abroad experience in London. I chose the city for a number of reasons, including my own knowledge of and interest in British culture and history. Moreover, students would have access to a strong foundation of past research because European scholars, who also have a rich tradition in the ethnography of communication, have explored a variety of speech practices in British society.

Communication faculty collaborated to develop multiple program goals and student-learning objectives. In general, we sought to give students a robust and worthwhile faculty-mentored research opportunity. Specifically, we wanted students to conduct an ethnography of speaking in order to advance an argument about how groups of Londoners' "particular ways of seeing and experiencing the world" were reflected in "particular ways of speaking" (Fitch 2001).

Two overarching program goals were chosen to guide the design of the program. First, we wanted students to be able to effectively describe, apply, and conduct an ethnography of speaking in order to advance their own knowledge and understanding of the relationship between communication and culture. Second, we wanted students to practice the steps involved in conducting a research project and therefore gain more mastery and understanding of how to use past research to drive new inquiries, to conceptualize a research question, and to design a study in order to organize, collect, and interpret data in an ethical, timely, and scholarly way. Conducting ethnographies of speaking would move students beyond baseline knowledge toward competence and mastery of culture-specific communication and research practice. Moreover, study abroad would amplify students' recognition of communication as a global and universal practice that itself manifests in diverse and rich ways calling for a tolerance of ambiguity, lifelong curiosity, and cultural sensitivity. As Bernhard T. Streitwieser writes, undergraduate research can provide "a powerful vehicle for more deeply exploring what global citizenship means through immersing students in the intensive study of an issue of personal interest in another culture" (2009, 401). Conducting rigorous, theoretically grounded research in London would allow our undergraduates to overcome the common misperception that because the two countries share a similar language tradition, stu-

dents from the U.S. who study in England cannot really learn much about culture (Edwards 2000).

To accomplish their research, students would also need to build their knowledge of British culture and society. Communication theory posits that culture is produced through the symbolic function of storytelling, myths, and rituals in a society. Therefore, I developed a course that blends treatment of the theoretical perspective with historical and contemporary accounts of British myths and rituals. Students come to understand, for example, how stories about King Richard "the Lionheart" have inspired images of lions in royal correspondence and publications. Similarly, students explore the history of the "union jack" British flag, and the meaning of the term "jack" for most Britons in the 1600's.

Collectively, students take a six-credit, two-course program that begins with in-person and online instruction at the start of the 12-week summer term and concludes with six weeks of research in London. All credits count toward graduation requirements in the School of Communications' degree programs. Students are required to apply for the program through Grand Valley's international programs office (the Padnos International Center) and are selected based on their successful completion of prerequisite courses and interest in British culture. Program participants pay the same tuition rate for study-abroad credits as they would for taking the same credits on-campus. In addition, participants pay a program fee that covers the cost of travel, housing, and meals. Tuition and fees are both managed by the university's accounting system, and this allows students to pay over time and to apply financial aid and scholarships to the costs.

Program Outcomes

Previous study-abroad literature explains the importance of effective pre-departure work to prepare students to make the most of short-term research opportunities (e.g., Orr 2009). Thus, I hold multiple in-person and online class meetings to prepare students for their research. Collectively, we engage in an overview of British history, society, and culture, paying special attention to the City of London. This preparation is purposely wide-ranging and interactive. For example, we read short stories about London's famous figures, view BBC segments on key historic events such as the London fire of 1666, and review academic papers on contemporary British society. We examine sample ethnographies conducted in the United States and in the United Kingdom. Students are also assigned to explore online collections in the British Library in order to produce brief informative presentations about connections between British communication and culture.

This cultural introduction is paired with instruction on the process for conducting ethnographies of speaking. In addi-

tion to training in the methodology, we review and discuss strategies for designing manageable research projects, and the expectations for the students' final projects. Finally, students submit project proposals for review. Students are expected to draw on their previous coursework, personal interest, and training in methodology to pose a research question or questions, justify their research design, defend the ethics of their proposal, and explain the potential value of their research. After their research proposals are approved, and prior to departure, students receive a course calendar that includes other small assignments designed to help them become established with their targeted "speech community" in London. The calendar also includes "research project targets" to help them manage time while we are abroad.

This pre-departure work is crucial to helping students "hit-the-ground-running" when we arrive. It also works to stimulate their interest in British culture and gives them confidence in the research process. Still, students do face challenges while conducting ethnographic research in another country. Some of these issues are expected in any undergraduate research experience. For instance, students grapple with how to organize their field notes and struggle with the desire to "know what I'm going to say" before actually completing their research. Other challenges come from studying abroad and negotiating a new culture. In one of my favorite anecdotes, a group of students was noticeably upset at arriving late to a class session, unprepared with a research update. They had been delayed at lunch (for over an hour) because the waiter had not brought a check to the table, and the students were too nervous to ask for it. They were surprised to learn that bringing the check prior to its request would have been considered rude.

Another research delay occurred when a group of students tried to print copies of surveys they hoped to hand out to visitors at the Victoria & Albert Museum. They did not discover that the English use A4 paper (longer and thinner than the American 8 1/2 x 11) until they scaled the museum steps; they had on hand more than 500 unusable surveys because they failed to look at the printed copies until they arrived. Multiple survey questions were cut off because of the narrower paper size. Such logistical issues are the most common obstacles students cited in discussing their research experience. As one student noted in a program follow-up, "doing research definitely means having patience and being flexible." Yet managing logistics is a key feature of successful research in any location. Still, it seems that students developed cultural knowledge through these typical challenges. As another student reported, "There are so many things that you would never expect to be different here, but they are."

Students also struggle in varying degrees with issues such as homesickness, fears of navigating public transportation,

concerns about being "too touristy," and anxiety about the overall value of their research projects. Together, students brainstorm strategies for addressing these issues and are encouraged to collaborate in order to accomplish their research goals. Students reflect individually on their research experience through guided journal entries and one-on-one meetings with me to stay on track.

One student, who proposed the project title "Pub Talk," for example, identified 18th and 19th century British coffee houses as a site of important political debate. Drawing on this historical precedent, the student sought to examine the topics of conversation at a variety of different pubs (the modern coffee house) in London. The student was excited about the topic, but struggled when we arrived in London. He felt awkward about sitting alone at a pub and nervous about talking with strangers. After realizing that a classmate was having similar challenges with a different project (studying football fans), the students teamed up to provide support for the field components of each research project. In the final work, the pub-talk student had engaged in silent observation, participant observation, and direct interviews with patrons at pubs in four different London neighborhoods, concluding that characteristics such as the time of day, physical features of the bar, and identity of the patron guided the topic of pub conversations.

Table 1 provides a sample of proposal titles and the general subject matter associated with the collection of research top-

Table 1. Research Proposal Titles and Topics

Title	Topic
Coochie-Cool! How to Talk to a Royal Baby	An analysis of ways of speaking about the birth of Prince George
London's Urban Commuters—by Foot, Bus, Bike, and Train	An exploration of expressions used to navigate the streets of London
Managing Tourists: A Review of Speech Strategies Used by Londoners	A discussion of how locals use modes of expression to control the behavior of tourists
When Brits Flirt: How Modern British Culture Shapes Flirting	Observations of male/female and same-sex interactions in British clubs
Politeness on the Underground	A taxonomy of politeness strategies used on the Tube
Performance Techniques of British Street Performers	A reflection on how the history of British theatre impacts the interaction between street performers and audiences
Royal Parks for Royal Subjects: Communicating in Hyde Park	Observations of adult/child interactions in Hyde Park
Symbolic Efforts of British Football Fans	A review of how football fans show their support for a favorite team
London's Immigrant Community in the Service Industry	An analysis of how immigrants who work as wait staff use language to negotiate their job experience
Pub Talk	Observations on the subjects of talk in British pubs

ics covered by students in the program in 2013 and 2014.

After returning from London, students are required to submit their research results and meet to share their results in an on-campus presentation. Students are invited to present their work in a style and form consistent with practices in their degree major. Some submit traditional papers. Others produce documentary-style audio and video collections of their findings and interpretation. One student reported findings through an original script for a one-act play.

Program Assessment

Multiple measures were used to assess the achievement of program goals and students' learning objectives. Direct measures included the research proposal, journal entries, and final project submission. Student work was assessed using a modified version of the Association of American Colleges & Universities' (AAC&U) "Intercultural Knowledge and Competence" Rubric. Adding research skills to the rubric produced a series of criteria used to assess students' learn-

ing about the relationship between British society and communication practices. While the AAC&U rubric employs a five-point scale, our decision to require that participants successfully complete prerequisites led to a three-point scale focused on higher levels of competence and mastery. A summary of the rubric is presented in Table 2.

I partnered with a colleague in the School of Communications to review and assess each project. Averages of our ratings of student work across all measures are provided in Table 3. These averages provide at least a minimal baseline for understanding students' learning in the program. Two years of programming result in a small sample for analysis (N=24). Yet the research experience appears successful on a number of dimensions, especially for helping students develop their level of openness to and understanding of the connection between communication and culture. That students seem less skilled in time management and articulating connections to past research may be explained by the content of pre-departure coursework and the unexpected effect of what happens when students are empowered to explore through research

Table 2. Assessment Rubric for Research in Communication & Culture

	3 - Mastery	2 - Milestone	1 - Milestone
Curiosity	Student asks complex questions about other cultures and uses research to explore multiple perspectives.	Student asks deeper questions about other cultures and seeks out answers to these questions.	Student asks simple or surface questions about other cultures.
Connections	Applies past research from diverse perspectives in complex ways that motivate current research practices.	Explores a variety of relevant past research to guide current questions and method.	Identifies some relevant past research to articulate a relationship to current questions and/or method.
Knowledge of method	Provides a complex discussion of ethnography of speaking in order to frame the value and process used in current research.	Accurately describes the theoretical foundations, purpose, and relevant conceptual aspects of method.	Accurately describes the basic purpose and concepts associated with ethnographies of speaking.
Data collection	Complexity of units of analysis observed and recorded by connecting collection sample to culture.	Observes and records a full range of units of analysis.	Appropriately observes and records some examples of units of analysis.
Application of method	Shows complex ability to interpret verbal and non-verbal elements of speech in terms of British culture.	Attempts to identify and interpret relevant verbal and non-verbal elements of speech in terms of British culture.	Is able to identify some elements of speech in terms of British culture.
Knowledge of world views	Demonstrates sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of British culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, rituals, beliefs, and practices.	Demonstrates adequate understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, rituals, beliefs, and practices.	Demonstrates partial understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, rituals, beliefs and practices.
Cultural self-awareness	Articulates insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how her/his experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).	Recognizes new perspectives about own cultural rules and biases (e.g., not looking for sameness; comfortable with the complexities that new perspectives offer).	Identifies own cultural rules and biases (e.g., with a strong preference for those rules shared with own cultural group and seeks the same in others).
Openness	Initiated and developed interactions with culturally different others. Suspended judgment in valuing her/his interactions to engage in the research process.	Began to initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others. Suspended some judgment in valuing her/his interactions with others during research.	Expressed openness to most, if not all, interactions. Had difficulty suspending judgment but is aware of it, expressed a willingness to change.
Time management	Completed the research process without panic or impatience, effectively managed time from start to finish.	Completed the research process with a struggle in one or more areas of timing.	Completed the research process but struggled to manage time in a way that permitted research to build from start to finish.
Knowledge of the research cycle	Posed thoughtful questions for future research that are deeply connected to current research.	Posed questions for future research that show some understanding of the research cycle.	Offered areas of future interest but may not indicate a relationship between these interests and the current study.

Table 3. Average Ratings of Student Research by Faculty

Dimension	Average Rating*
Curiosity	2.3
Connections	2.1
Knowledge of method	2.3
Data collection	2.4
Application of method	2.3
Knowledge of world views	2.7
Cultural self-awareness	2.8
Openness	2.9
Time management	2.0
Knowledge of the research cycle	2.1

*On a three-point scale.

questionnaire” can provide a “reliable indicator of a program’s mission and priorities” by highlighting the aspects of intercultural competence important to the program and its mission. Asking questions about how students managed their time and the literature-review requirements for their projects led to student insights and also contributed to students’ reflective experience. This indirect measure revealed that students did indeed feel more open to cultural experiences as a result of the program. As one student explained, “I had to force myself to get out and interact with people, and learn how to use public transportation, in order to get my work done. Once I realized that I could do it, I stopped being afraid and wanted a chance to see everything!”

At the same time, reviewing past research was less exciting once students returned to the U.S. A participant explained, “I hadn’t thought about it until now, but I was mad that I had to work on my project when we got back. I didn’t want to spend hours writing about journal articles. I wanted to tell people about all the things I learned on my own.”

Balancing Research with Study-Abroad Goals: Lessons Learned

I learned a number of lessons from this research experience that can be helpful for faculty and programs considering similar opportunities for their students.

Lesson 1: Take Advantage of Faculty Expertise. Currently, relatively few U.S. undergraduates engage in research abroad. When they do, students are often working with instructors and program directors from institutions abroad, students have little training in the methodological approaches employed, and students fail to draw connections between their

during study-abroad.

Following the completion of their coursework, students answered a series of questions about the research program. Lilli Engle (2009) cautions against the use of self-reports focused on “satisfaction” with overseas programs to assess student experiences abroad. Instead, Engle argues persuasively that a thoughtfully designed “end-of-program qualitative assessment question-



Faculty-director (Danielle Leek) and students (Jordan Boze, Karli Clark, Sarah Duplanty, Alexandra Elliot, Margaret Jewell, Amanda Mikolajczyk, Katie Munding, Daniel Treat, Jessica Utter, Brittany Wakefield) pose outside their excursion for afternoon tea in North London. (Photo credit: Katie Munding)

research and broader academic or career goals (Houlihan 2007; Streitwieser 2009). By designing a program that makes use of my own knowledge of the students’ past coursework, British culture, and ethnographic approaches to the study of communication, I am able to serve as both teacher and research mentor. Leading study-abroad research also requires a tremendous commitment of time and energy from the faculty member or members involved with the program. Focusing the program on my areas of interest and expertise makes the effort worthwhile and contributes to my sincere enjoyment of the experience.

Lesson 2: Stay Focused on Program Goals. In the developmental stage, it was tempting to aspire to have students achieve all of the learning outcomes associated with undergraduate research and study-abroad programming. I had to keep in mind that the purpose of the program was to improve our curriculum’s research opportunities, not accomplish complete intercultural competence for all students. Therefore, the rubric designed to assess student learning and the focus of the study-abroad content was culture-specific. Yet, as hoped, the ethnographic experience inspired students to believe in their capacity to explore and engage other cultures and increased their desire to do so in the future. On the follow-up questionnaire, students universally expressed a sense that as a result of the program, they will more actively seek out opportunities, consider a job abroad, talk more with others from culturally diverse backgrounds, and so on. Still, assessment showed that students fared better in the cultural-knowledge compo-



Students (Alexandra Elliot, Katie Mundinger, Daniel Treat, Jessica Utter) practice broadcasting skills in the BBC studio.

ment of the experience than they did on dimensions related to expressing the results of their research. This is a common challenge for undergraduates, especially those from arts and humanities traditions in which traditional expectations of research are less well integrated into their academic life.

Lesson 3: Maintain Reasonable Expectations for Student Work. One of my personal challenges during the study-abroad program is expecting students to be as excited and motivated as I am about their research projects. I might feel as though a student has identified an engaging line of inquiry and then feel frustrated when that student's visit to St. Paul's Cathedral (or other tourist attraction) trumps spending extra time on research. On the other hand, I may believe that a student hasn't gone far enough to identify something unique and worthy of study. But it is important not to expect or compare undergraduate research to the work we expect from faculty or graduate students.

To date, all of the students involved were in London for the first time (and many were abroad for the first time) during the program. Similarly, most participants had no research experience outside of classroom activities. Throughout our time in London, I work to see the city and the research process through the eyes of a novice. I share with students reflections from my own research journal, remembering how, for instance, I first learned that "trousers" was a more appropriate word than "pants" when speaking with British colleagues. While hardly a substantial finding at that time, I wrote in my journal about the possibilities for an entire study based only on differences between the ways Americans and Britons talk about clothes. When I feel critical of a student's accomplishment, I stop to remind myself that "first-time independent research should be a formative and critical learning experience for students. While most undergraduate research may, indeed, not be original, this fact does not mean that it cannot have distinctive value" (Streitwieser 2009, 407). This is especially true for undergraduates conducting their first research project abroad.

Conclusion

Research and study abroad are high-impact practices that engage undergraduates and inspire their interest in learning. Bringing research opportunities and study abroad together opens up new possibilities, especially when a student's home campus is too limited a site for interrogation of topics such as communication and culture. In this case, ethnographies of speech patterns in different venues and communities in London, conducted by American students, highlight the ways that navigating research in another country can encourage learning about the research process and inspire appreciation for cultural diversity. Faculty interested in this type of program should take care to select sites that connect with their own interests and scholarly pursuits in order to help facilitate the learning process. 

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