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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-IDENTIFIED CULTURAL
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**STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-IDENTIFIED CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS
DURING A SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM**

By

Cathryn Johnson Brubaker

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SELF-IDENTIFIED CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS DURING A SHORT-TERM STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM

By

Cathryn Johnson Brubaker

This study investigates how 18 undergraduate U.S. American students made sense of their daily cultural encounters as they participated in a 6-week language and culture study abroad program in Mayen, Germany. Guided by aspects of several perspectives on culture learning (Bennett, 1993; Hess, 1997; Kim, 1988; Moran, 2001; Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein & Colby, 2003) and using an interpretive qualitative research methodology and ethnographic techniques, this case study illuminates students' experiences with culture learning from the participants' perspective and highlights several issues that factored into these experiences and perspectives. There were two purposes to this research. The first was to document how students defined, experienced, and perceived self-identified cultural encounters as they navigated the complexities of their study abroad program. The second was to conceptualize culture learning during short-term study abroad.

The findings of this study led to several conclusions. First, short-term study abroad programs like the Mayen program can be fertile and productive venues for culture learning; however, culture learning needs to become a priority and as explicit an endeavor as language learning. Second, short-term study abroad should be viewed as a way to not only introduce students to one or more cultures, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as an opportunity to develop culture learning strategies that can prepare students for future intercultural experiences abroad and at home. Third, program

components, such as the host family and weekend travel, should be carefully examined in order to determine if and how they support, or possibly hinder, culture learning. Fourth, both students' and faculty leaders' pre-existing ideas about culture and culture learning need to be addressed, explored, and discussed both before and during the program, so that all involved are on the same page and working towards the same goals. Fifth, while students grappled with deeper subjective elements of culture while abroad, they still needed guidance, in the form of culture learning strategies and a vocabulary for investigating, articulating, and processing their observations, experiences, interactions, reactions, and feelings. Sixth, because students possess varying backgrounds, personalities, interests, goals, and previous travel experience, students need to be met where they are in their culture learning journey and given the freedom and encouragement to explore and discuss what is intriguing and meaningful to them. Thus I suggest that short-term programs such as the Mayen program be viewed as a unique opportunity for cultural data collection and examination with culture learning serving as both an academic focus and method of learning.

For my grandmother,
Judyth Roberta Rose Graham

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION TO STUDY

Study abroad is in the midst of a significant period of evolution. The past decade has witnessed a substantial increase in types of study abroad programs, student participation, and recognition and esteem on both university and national levels. Accompanying this rapid growth are increasing numbers of studies conducted from various disciplinary perspectives that question long-held assumptions about the nature and impact of study abroad experiences. Study abroad seems to be advancing beyond its two-decades long identity as “a curious hybrid between an academic discipline and a professional practice whose discourse is often characterized by the repetition of unquestioned dogmas and the use of inadequately defined terms” (Grünzweig & Rinehart, 2002, p. 6).

There now appears to be a call for accountability that goes beyond the belief that a study abroad experience in and of itself automatically results in desired outcomes, such as increased understanding of other cultures (Cohen, Paige, Shively, Emert & Hoff, 2005; Stronkhorst, 2005), especially in the case of short-term programs lasting eight weeks or fewer. This call for accountability has sparked studies seeking to assess specific outcomes engendered by participation in a study abroad program (Rundstrom-Williams, 2005), as well as for improving the quality and facilitation of existing study abroad programs (Engle & Engle, 2002; Stronkhorst, 2005). Additionally, more research that investigates students’ experiences during study abroad is needed (Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005), as such research illuminates the complexity of study abroad, explores the

processes that produce outcomes, and can inform the design of study abroad preparation and programs (Laubscher, 1994; Wilkinson, 2000).

My dissertation seeks to join the current examination and discussion of study abroad assumptions and subsequent frameworks regarding the short-term language and culture study abroad experience. Building on the scant existing short-term study abroad research, and guided by aspects of several perspectives on culture learning (Bennett, 1993; Hess, 1997; Kim, 1988; Moran, 2001; Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein & Colby, 2003), my study investigates how 18 undergraduate students made sense of their daily cultural encounters during their participation in the 6-week “German Language and Culture in Mayen” program (henceforth referred to as the Mayen program). Using an interpretive qualitative research methodology, this case study illuminates students’ experiences with culture learning from the participants’ perspective, and highlights several issues that factored into students’ experiences and perspectives.

The urgency of this study lies in the fact that most short-term study abroad students are “left to their own cultural devices” (Engle & Engle, 2002, p. 26) while abroad, due to an implicit assumption that students will automatically learn about another culture simply because they are in another culture. Moreover, as Brislin, Cushner & Cherrie (1986) note:

The analysis of tourist experiences is important since they are so commonly discussed when sojourners meet with each other. Too often, negative experiences are retold, and such retelling reinforces a negative image of the host country. If the sophistication of people’s analyses of such experiences can be improved, then the chances of a successful adjustment can be increased. (p. 131)

It has been suggested that students need guidance beyond the usual frontloaded on-campus or initial on-site orientation in order to gain a deeper experience abroad (Engle &

Engle, 2002) and progress from awareness of cultural differences to a deeper understanding of them (Laubscher, 1994); however, we cannot guide students in their culture learning sufficiently without first understanding the short-term study abroad experience from the perspective of those who need this guidance. This dissertation seeks to provide this perspective. To my knowledge, no prior study such as this has been undertaken.

This study has two goals. The primary goal is to document how a group of students defined, experienced, and perceived their self-identified cultural encounters as they navigated the complexities of their study abroad program. The secondary goal is to conceptualize culture learning during short-term study abroad.

The Current State of Study Abroad

Participating in a study abroad program is now a decidedly desirable and highly promoted component of the undergraduate college experience in the U.S., as spending time abroad is typically viewed as an optimal way to increase intercultural understanding (Stephenson, 2002). In fact, in the 2003 NAFSA: Association of International Educators Report of the Strategic Task Force on Education Abroad¹ it was concluded that “an educational opportunity outside the United States can be among the most valuable tools for preparing a student to participate effectively in an increasingly interconnected international community that demands cross-cultural skills and knowledge” (p. 4). NAFSA therefore continues to request that the President and Congress create an International Education Policy for the U.S., as it is recognized that possessing a profound understanding of world cultures is a required 21st century skill (Johnson, 2005). In

¹ This report can be downloaded at <http://www.nafsa.org>.

recognition and support of study abroad, the U.S. Senate unanimously voted to declare 2006 the Year of Study Abroad.

As part of an effort to internationalize higher education, study abroad has received increased attention (Talbert & Stewart, 1999). U.S. universities and colleges have individually set ambitious study abroad participation goals. Michigan State University (MSU), for example, is working towards sending 40% of undergraduate students abroad. On a national level, the newly established Commission on the Lincoln Study Abroad Program² proposes sending one million students abroad by 2016, which is half of the annual figure of students expected to receive a college degree.

Participation in study abroad has increased dramatically nationwide. According to the 2005 Institute for International Education Open Doors Report 191,321 U.S. students studied abroad during the 2003/2004 academic year, which is more than double the participation rate from a decade ago (76, 302 students in 1993/1994). Moreover, participation continues to increase each year. In fact, the 2003/2004 academic year saw participation increase 9.5% (from 174,629 to 191,321 students) just from the previous year (Open Doors, 2005). Clearly, study abroad is expected to remain what Goodwin and Nacht (1988) termed “a growth industry” (Hoffa, 2002, p. 68).

In order to make study abroad accessible to more students, many colleges, universities, and third-party providers now offer a plethora of study abroad opportunities specially designed to accommodate the diverse academic, financial, and personal interests and constraints that in the past created substantial barriers to studying abroad. Previously

² In order to help facilitate reaching their study abroad participation goal, The Commission on the Lincoln Study Abroad Program offers Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowships and Scholarships in order to decrease financial barriers to study abroad participation. More information can be found at their website: <http://www.lincolncommission.org/index.html>.

geared towards chiefly foreign language majors of junior class standing, study abroad is now being actively expanded to create opportunities for students across disciplines, from freshman through senior year. In fact, during the 2003/2004 academic year the top two majors of study abroad students were social science (22.6%) and business and management (17.5%) (Open Doors, 2005). Although myriad nations worldwide are steadily increasing in popularity as study abroad destinations, Western European countries continue to dominate as favorite locations (Open Doors, 2005; Woolf, 2001).

Short-term Study Abroad

While a growing number of increasingly diverse students are venturing outside the U.S., they are spending less time abroad (Davis & Mello, 2003). Whereas 14.3% of students who studied abroad did so for an academic year in 1993/1994, only 6% spent a year abroad in 2003/2004, meaning that 94% of students participated in a program lasting one semester or less (Open Doors, 2005). Short-term study abroad has grown in popularity with 56% of students “electing summer, January term, and other programs of 8 weeks or less” (Open Doors, 2005). Such short programs are cited as the driving force behind the remarkable growth in overall study abroad participation. Many expect short-term program participation to continue to increase (Loveland & Murphy, 2006). For example, in an interview discussing Goucher College’s new study abroad requirement, college president Sanford Ungar noted that he soon expected to double the capacity of their three-week intensive study abroad programs (Loveland, 2006).³

Short-term programs can vary widely in duration, geographic location, academic focus and rigor, cost, foreign language requirements, students’ prior exposure to and

³ Goucher College has begun requiring all undergraduates to participate in a 3-week winter break, summer, semester or academic year study abroad program.

experience with the target language and culture, and extent of host country immersion. Programs can range, for example, from a 10-day multi-city or country study tour conducted in English to an 8-week foreign language immersion program that includes a home-stay and classes taught in the target language. What these programs have in common, and what contributes to their popularity, is cost-effectiveness, wide-spread student appeal, and administrative ease (Engle & Engle, 2003; Woolf, 2001; Zamastil-Vondorova, 2005).

Short-term study abroad is well-received by students for several reasons. Since programs typically take place during semester breaks, January- or May-terms, or over the summer, students can study abroad without forgoing academic, extra-curricular, or employment options that occur during the academic year. Short-term programs typically offer courses that fulfill major, minor or elective requirements that students would need to take even if they remained at their home campus. Additionally, students can study abroad several times during their undergraduate career, and thus have the opportunity to learn about and explore several parts of the world. Moreover, short-term programs offer a sense of security (Woolf, 2001), as students typically venture abroad as a group comprised of U.S. American students and at least one faculty leader, who are often all from the same home institution. In short, these programs can provide students with an educational experience abroad of which they might otherwise not have been able or willing to take advantage.

Statement of the Research Problem

Recent research has begun to reveal the complex nature of students' experiences with culture learning while abroad. Long-held and largely unproven assumptions that

students will develop intercultural awareness, sensitivity or understanding during and as a result of participating in a study abroad program, particularly in the short-term context, are being questioned. However, the research base at this point is small and there remains much to be learned about students' experiences with and perceptions of culture learning during short-term study abroad. Although culture learning is thought to be a vital aspect of and reason for studying abroad, there exists no framework for culture learning that has been created for or can be specifically applied to the short-term context. There is a great need to understand students' experiences with and perceptions of culture learning during a short-term program so that appropriate steps can be devised and taken to better support participants' culture learning before, during, and after a short-term study abroad program. It is particularly important to explore the short-term study duration, as this is the fastest-growing sector of study abroad enterprise.

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to understand how undergraduate students made sense of their daily cultural encounters as they participated in a short-term language and culture study abroad program. There are two purposes to this research. The first is to document how students defined, experienced, and perceived self-identified cultural encounters as they navigated the complexities of their study abroad program. The second is to propose a way of thinking about and approaching culture learning during a short-term program so that those in charge of developing, leading, and teaching such programs can better meet students' culture learning needs before, during, and after the program.

Concerns Prompting the Study

The focus of the current study grew out of personal and professional experiences over several years, combined with recognizing concerns expressed anecdotally and in study abroad literature. In order to provide a context for the study, a discussion of these experiences and concerns follows.

First Concern: Short-term Study Abroad Students' Post-program Comments

During my tenure as a German instructor at MSU, several of my second-year German language students excitedly told me of their plans to participate in the 6-week Mayen program. As someone who only participated in academic-year study abroad programs in high school and college, I was skeptical about the efficacy of short-term programs. What could a student gain in terms of language or culture learning from a mere six weeks abroad, I wondered. Thus, while I supported any study abroad opportunity, I always encouraged my students to consider a semester or academic-year program.

Later, while working part-time in the Office of Study Abroad at MSU, I noticed that the majority of students I assisted were interested in short-term study abroad options. Some students even participated in multiple short-term programs in different countries. Indeed, at MSU short-term study abroad programs significantly outnumber semester and year-long programs. My interest in understanding the short-term study abroad experience from the participants' perspective was piqued.

I began my investigation by perusing the short-term language and culture program evaluations, written by returned participants, that were archived in the study abroad office. I became intrigued by what some students wrote about their summer abroad. Students' overall evaluations of their study abroad programs were overwhelmingly

positive; most stated they would recommend the program to others, and nearly all students indicated they would like to study abroad again. However, amid students' comments identifying increased language and cultural knowledge, personal growth, and modified views about the world as benefits of participating in a short-term study abroad program, were remarks⁴ such as:

- Be prepared that French people don't have much tact.
- Germans are weird – they all smoke, the kids are devil spawn.
- French men are too aggressive.
- People stare at you...people will try to rip you off, so watch your \$.
- The Germans are not friendly.
- The French people are very uptight and they freaked out a lot.
- Germans stare and make fun of you.

These harsh evaluations seemed to support my skepticism about short-term study abroad, which I discovered was shared by others. For example, Engle & Engle (2002) state:

We know that brief stays allow an at best superficial interaction with the host culture, one that can easily have the reverse of desired outcomes in its reinforcement of stereotypes in the eyes of program participants with only minimal understanding of the complex of factors comprising the host culture. (p. 36)

I found students' comments about their French and German hosts troubling and this ignited my interest in exploring students' perspectives of culture learning during short-term study abroad. Several questions came to mind at this early stage:

⁴ Comments were taken from program evaluations for short-term programs to Germany and France during 2001 and 2002.

- How do students experience a short-term language and culture study abroad program?
- How do students perceive short-term study abroad as a culture learning experience?
- What types of experiences or encounters abroad might fuel harsh evaluations of other cultures?
- What are students' perceptions of such experiences or encounters?

Second Concern: The Dearth of Short-term Study Abroad Research

When I consulted the literature I found very few studies focusing on students' experiences, and perceptions of those experiences, especially regarding culture learning and the short-term program context. Instead, the majority of study abroad research focuses on semester and academic-year programs, outcomes measured before and after study abroad (Laubscher, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998a), generalities rather than the specifics that shape students' experiences (Talbert & Stewart, 1999; Wilkinson, 2000), and students' satisfaction with their study abroad experience (Stronkhorst, 2005).

As I conducted a literature review, I also found an interesting paradox in current thinking about study abroad. The legitimacy of study abroad has resided in the ideal that an abroad experience will contribute to international understanding (Grünzweig & Rinehart, 2002) and in some way contribute positively to society (Stronkorst, 2005). Moreover, spending time abroad is generally viewed as the optimal vehicle for learning the language and culture of another country (Talbert & Stewart, 1999), due to the potential for interaction with native speakers and first-hand cultural experiences. As Wilkinson (1998b) notes, this view has been supported by research on language learning

in a study abroad context that suggests favorable improvements in language development. However, the long-held belief that simply being abroad will automatically spark meaningful learning of another culture is increasingly being questioned (e.g. Grünzweig & Rinehart, 2002; Hoffa, 2002; Stephenson, 2002; Wilkinson, 2000). Hess (1997), for example, states that culture learning is not native to everyone who ventures abroad.

To be sure, most people who leave home for an international trip bring home stories of their adventures and descriptions of the people they saw. Some may talk about the quaint habits, the new foods, and strange costumes encountered along the way. They show their snapshots and purchases. But this booty doesn't confirm that culture learning has taken place. For many, the gap between their native culture and the foreign culture remains unbridged. (p. 1)

However, the study abroad experience is often still viewed through the lens of an “implicit assumption...[that] life abroad will simply work its magic” (Engle & Engle, 2002, p. 26). Recent research has shown, however, that study abroad is not necessarily as “magical” as once assumed; rather, students seem ill-prepared for the reality that learning another culture is a complex, challenging, and sometimes painful process (Citron, 2002; Stephenson, 2002; Wilkinson, 1998b). Moreover, research has noted the need for more and better student preparation, guidance, and support in culture learning (Wilkinson, 1998a), especially during short programs abroad when students are not afforded the time to learn by trial and error. The question thus arises, how do we prepare students to meet culture learning challenges if we do not understand these challenges from the students' point of view?

On the heels of this questioning is the call for further investigation into students' experiences and perceptions (Hoffa, 2002; Laubscher, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998a), especially during a short-term study abroad program, as there is currently a paucity of such studies. As Hoffa notes:

Given the new skepticism of many campus colleagues who believe that the further study abroad moves away from the full and extended cultural immersion experience, the less successful it will be (even if the courses are 'OK'), it is especially important to pay more attention to what our students can teach us from their experiences. What they mean when they say, along with their predecessors, that living and learning overseas was 'the best experience of my life,' ought to be something we listen to and learn from. Program goals and means of support will need to be adjusted to fit the givens and realities of this new age. Only if we can come to grips with the complex reasons for the returned students' support for study abroad will we be able to defend it on grounds that are again convincing to ourselves and to those with whom we work and to whom we are ultimately answerable. (p. 72)

We simply know very little about the short-term study abroad experience. With the increasing popularity of short-term programs, however, there is a definite need to increase this knowledge base. Moreover, an increased understanding of students' experiences during short-term study abroad can help illuminate their choices, perceptions, and decisions. Such insight could in turn help us understand the processes that engender outcomes identified in impact studies (Laubscher, 1994) and devise ways of better meeting students' culture learning needs.

Third Concern: A Deficit Perspective of Short-term Study Abroad

Short-term programs...have often been regarded by practitioners of study abroad programs as at best an easy way out of a semester-long commitment on the part of students, and at worst a kind of superficial academic tourism that reinforces stereotypes and misunderstandings of "the Other." (Kinsella, Smith-Simonet & Tuma, 2002, p. 204)

Another concern prompting this study, of which I became acutely aware during my research, is best illustrated with an anecdote from personal experience. As a German language instructor, and Peer Advisor in the Office of Study Abroad at MSU, I often found myself answering students' questions about short-term study abroad options. While I was conversant with the topics and logistics of specific programs, I was largely ignorant

of the experience. As previously mentioned, I was skeptical of such brief “jaunts” abroad. However, I came to realize that my skepticism about short-term study abroad stemmed, in part, from my own study abroad history.

My first experience abroad was at sixteen years old when I spent my senior year of high school living with a family and attending a school in a town near Hamburg, Germany. The first month of my exchange year comprised an orientation course, during which all exchange students were divided into small groups and sent to various cities in Germany. We lived with temporary host families and attended morning language and afternoon culture courses five days a week. During my first month in Braunschweig I added full German sentences to my non-verbal communication with my host family, learned how to navigate the public transportation system, and drank my first beer. When I was alone I became overwhelmed by homesickness; therefore, most of my free time was spent exploring Braunschweig in the company of the other U.S. Americans in my orientation course. Together we compared fountain pens at the stationery boutiques, attended host family events, and rode our bikes from village to village to visit each other in the evenings. After four weeks of an intense yet superficial introduction to Germany, we moved to all reaches of the country to our permanent host families, where we spent the subsequent 11 months of our exchange year.

I have always felt it was the taxing 11-month full immersion experience that led to significant changes in my understanding of Germany, the U.S., and myself, as well as any skills or strategies I had developed to cultivate this understanding. Because the only personal experience I had that approximated short-term study abroad was that initial 4-week orientation course, I automatically likened that experience to current short-term

programs. I considered how it would have been had those first four weeks comprised my entire original abroad experience. Surely I would have returned home declaring increased German ability and significant personal change. I probably would have also claimed possessing a wider perspective of the world, due to having seen more of it. Certainly I would have wanted to go abroad again. However, I would not have returned home with the deep experiences, changes, and understanding fostered by the subsequent 11 months abroad. When compared to what comprised the majority of my exchange year, the first four weeks seemed inconsequential.

I address my initial sojourn abroad because as I probed the biases that led to my skepticism of, and subsequent interest in, short-term study abroad, I realized that I viewed my first month in Germany, and as a result all short-term study abroad programs, from the perspective of having spent the entire year abroad. From this perspective, I recognized everything I would *not* have experienced and learned had I only gone abroad for one month. Consequently, I viewed short-term study abroad from a deficit perspective. Comparing short-term programs to semester or year-long options, I thus identified only what I assumed participants would *not* gain from spending such a short time abroad.

I posit that this deficit view of short-term programs is perhaps implicitly held in the field, since those in international education have typically spent a significant amount of time deeply immersed in another language and culture. With good intentions, we want and encourage prospective study abroad participants to have the same enriching experience we did. Perhaps this implicit deficit perspective leads to characterizing short-term study abroad as merely stepping stones, baby steps, or a foot in the door to the study

abroad holy grail: a year-long direct enrollment program. A short-term program can conceivably open the door to a subsequent semester or year-long stay abroad; however, is the primary function of short-term study abroad to provide a gateway to the longer programs? Can short-term programs establish their own validity?

We must realize that a short-term program might not be considered short by the prospective student (Dessoiff, 2006). Evaluating short-term study abroad from a deficit perspective prevents us from validating students' experiences and concerns, focusing on students' actual learning experiences, identifying areas in need of improvement, and recognizing the opportunities uniquely inherent to the short-term context. Fortunately, intriguing questions are being pursued regarding such programs. For example, in the special interest session "Short-term/long-term programs: Beyond the issue of either/or" at The Forum on Education Abroad Annual Fall Conference in 2005, questions such as the following were discussed⁵:

- Can we apply the same guidelines, standards, and practices to both short-term and long-term study abroad programs? Or to all short-term study abroad programs?
- Shouldn't short-term study abroad have intrinsic value as a stand-alone?
- Does short-term study abroad necessitate changes in our academic and cultural goals and expectations? And if so, what are our obligation[s] to students...in terms of communicating these expectations?
- Is "context" (curricular/cultural integration) more or less important than for long-term study abroad?

⁵ From the session handout posted on The Forum on Education Abroad's website: <http://www.forumea.org>.

Such inquiries indicate an interest in exploring short-term study abroad on its own terms, which is crucial if programs are to be improved.

While year-long direct enrollment immersion programs may lead to a deeper cultural experience, the reality is that spending that length of time abroad is simply not an option for the majority of students who wish to study abroad. For many students, a short-term program might ultimately be the best, or only, option for them at the time. Hoffa (2002) notes that,

The fact remains that students return today from study abroad no less satisfied than they have ever been, though their satisfactions may be somewhat different than those of past decades. Our 'Paris' and their 'Paris' may not be the same, but who can say objectively and conclusively that one was in fact 'better' than the other as a place to live and learn at the age of twenty? Students continue to praise the opportunities they feel they have had to challenge, test, and get to know themselves, and to get to know other people and places (p. 71-72).

We cannot ignore the growing multitude of students who for valid reasons choose a short-term program over longer-term options. Nor can we wait until students enroll in a longer-term program to provide culture learning support and guidance. Rather, we must provide students with the best culture learning experience possible during the time they are abroad, regardless the duration.

Overview of Study

Pilot Study

In the spring of 2003, I began the current investigation with a pilot study exploring short-term study abroad students' perceptions of and experiences with culture learning. My principal goal was to narrow my focus and develop research questions for this dissertation. I chose the Mayen program for both the pilot and subsequent

dissertation studies because it was a well-established and popular program associated with my academic department.

In order to collect data, I attended general and program-specific pre-departure information and orientation sessions and then wrote up fieldnotes, interviewed a former Mayen program faculty member, and conducted three semi-structured audio-taped focus group interviews on the MSU campus with seven Mayen program alumni. I also interviewed three students who were planning to participate in the then upcoming 2003 Mayen program. Additionally, I administered a pre-departure questionnaire to 15 of the 2003 program participants who attended the pre-departure meeting, and I traveled to Mayen in order to spend the first 10 days of the program observing and interviewing current participants. A second questionnaire was administered by the faculty leader to all 19 participants at the end of the Mayen program.

What became salient in my pilot study were the stories students told me, in the focus group interviews and during my visit to the Mayen program as it was occurring, about their experiences abroad. I also found it interesting that when I asked students to describe the Mayen program as a culture learning experience, students mentioned, for example, attending a colorful soccer celebration or learning about and using “proper etiquette.” Students’ meager responses focused on culture-specific items that they had seen or learned about. When, however, I asked students to simply tell me about their experiences in Mayen, they exploded with colorful stories of annoying, frustrating, and euphoric experiences that often included cultural generalizations.

Students’ enthusiastic recounting of their daily experiences abroad intrigued me, and I wanted to know more about their perceptions of their cultural experiences or

encounters abroad. I was also initially interested in students' cultural generalizations, and their varying recognition that their cultural interpretations might not be correct. Initial questions flooded my mind:

- If presented the task of writing about their cultural encounters, what would students write about over the course of five weeks in Mayen?
- How would students depict these self-identified cultural encounters?
- How would students describe and perceive their learning process?
- Would the way students described and interpreted their cultural encounters change over time?

I decided therefore to focus my dissertation research on how students made sense of their daily cultural encounters as they participated in the Mayen program.

The Current Study

Using ethnographic techniques, this interpretive qualitative study describes and examines how 18 undergraduate university students made sense of their daily cultural encounters as they navigated the experiences inherent to the Mayen program. Data collection included three program participant questionnaires, 10 cultural encounter letters⁶ from each of the 18 students, fieldnotes from the five weeks students lived in Mayen, focus group interviews with students in Mayen, and individual post-program interviews with 14 of the 18 participants.

⁶ Each student wrote 10 one- to two-page letters to the faculty leader about cultural encounters they had during their stay in Mayen. This data source is explained in greater detail in chapter 3: Methodology.

The Study Abroad Program

The Mayen program, which was started by an MSU faculty member in his hometown,⁷ is a popular 6-week language and culture program that was in its 31st year of operation when the students in this study participated in the program. Students reside with local host families during their five weeks in Mayen, attend upper-division German language and culture classes taught by the faculty leader and a local native speaker, and participate in numerous excursions and activities in and around Mayen that foster much contact with local Mayen residents. Students are encouraged to travel away from Mayen during their long weekends, in order to explore other locations in and around Germany, and the entire group spends the final week of the program traveling to Berlin and surrounding cities.

Theoretical Framework

As there is no specific model of culture learning that was created for or applies specifically to the short-term study abroad context, I took aspects of several perspectives to create my theoretical framework. First, Bennett (1993) provides a developmental roadmap of what he terms intercultural sensitivity. Second, Paige et al.'s (2003) conceptual model describes the dimensions of culture learning in a way that is applicable to the content and goals of a language and culture study abroad program. Third, Kim's (1988) model sheds light on the dynamics of the culture learning process that is based on repeated encounters with cultural differences during a sojourn abroad. Fourth, Moran (2001) offers a model for how culture learning can be made a conscious and explicit process in the foreign language classroom, and, I posit, a language and culture study

⁷ Dr. Kurt Schild, the MSU professor who started the Mayen program, wrote an article in a 1977 issue of *Die Unterrichtspraxis* that describes aspects of the Mayen program as it was at that time. See bibliography for article citation.

abroad program. Fifth, Hess (1997) describes the attitudes and character traits that seem to promote culture learning, and offers a strategy for learning in and from an intercultural environment.

Research Questions

The primary research question of this study is:

How did students define, experience, and perceive self-identified cultural encounters as they navigated the 2004 6-week Mayen study abroad program?

Because I conducted a study that sought to understand what was salient to the participants, it was important that I leave my research direction somewhat open and flexible (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). However, it was likewise important to go into data collection and analysis with some sort of plan, so as not to lose focus. Therefore, I developed the following set of guiding questions. As I progressed through data collection and analysis, and became more cognizant of participants' perspectives, some questions became more relevant than others.

- 1) How do students describe cultural encounters in assigned written narratives?
 - a) What are the apparent criteria by which students select or identify a specific cultural encounter?
 - b) What is the content of the cultural encounters that students describe in assigned written narratives?
 - c) How does the content of students' cultural encounters change over time?
- 2) How do students interpret and analyze cultural encounters in assigned written narratives?

- a) How do students' interpretations and analyses of cultural encounters change over time?
- 3) What seems to be the relationship between students' interpretations and analyses of cultural encounters and their assertions about another culture?
- 4) How do students explicitly define culture?
 - a) Do, and how do, these definitions change over time?
 - b) Where and how do students think they learn about culture?
 - c) Are, and how are, students' definitions reflected in students' stories about, and interpretations and analyses of, cultural encounters?
- 5) How do students critique their ways of selecting, describing, interpreting, and analyzing cultural encounters?
 - a) Do, and how do, students view themselves as effective in negotiating, interpreting, and analyzing cultural encounters?

Definition of Terms

As the field of study abroad suffers from a lack of consistent and well-defined terminology (Grünzweig & Rinehart, 2002) it is important that the terms central to this study be defined.

- 1) Culture: My definition of culture is consistent with that of Geertz (1973) when he states:

The concept of culture I espouse...is a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning (p. 5).

In accord with Paige et al. (2003), I view culture as dynamic and constructed through interaction and communication between people possessing a range of value orientations and behaviors.

For the purpose of this dissertation, when discussing culture in relation to how students' articulated their definitions, perspectives, and experiences abroad, I employ the terms objective and subjective culture. These terms are defined as follows:⁸

Objective culture refers to the visible or tangible elements of a culture: such aspects as the artifacts made, the clothing worn, the foods eaten, and sometimes the names given to things. Objective cultural elements are easy to see and touch, and people generally agree upon what it is that they can observe. (Cushner, 2004, p. 39-40)

Subjective culture is a cultural group's characteristic way of perceiving the man-made part of its environment. The perception of rules and the group's norms, roles, and values are aspects of subjective culture. (Triandis, 1972, p. 4)

I also use language from the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century⁹ when referring to the elements of objective (products, practices) and subjective (perspectives) culture:

Products are "tangible (e.g., a painting, a piece of literature, a pair of chopsticks) or intangible (e.g., an oral tale, a dance, a sacred ritual, a system of education)" and "its presence within the culture is required or justified" by the culture's perspectives.

Practices are "patterns of behavior accepted by a society" and derived from the culture's perspectives.

⁸ The distinction between objective and subjective culture was originally conceptualized by Triandis (1972). Cushner's (2004) definition is based on Triandis' ideas. I used these excerpts because they provided clear and succinct definitions.

⁹ From the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century: Executive Summary, which can be downloaded from the following website: <http://www.yearoflanguages.org>.

Perspectives are “the traditional ideas and attitudes of a culture.”

- 2) Learning: For the purposes of this study, learning is defined in terms of experiential learning, as described by Kolb (1984): “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38).

Kolb also describes four critical aspects of the learning process:

First is the emphasis on the process of adaptation and learning as opposed to content or outcomes. Second is that knowledge is a transformation process, being continuously created and recreated, not an independent entity to be acquired or transmitted. Third, learning transforms experience in both its objective and subjective forms. Finally, to understand learning, we must understand the nature of knowledge, and vice versa. (p. 38)

- 3) Culture learning: While my theoretical framework includes several perspectives on learning another culture during study abroad, for the purposes of this dissertation I use Paige et al.’s (2003) definition to conceptualize culture learning:¹⁰

Culture learning is the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively (p. 177).

- 4) Cultural encounters: One of the goals of this dissertation is to explore how the students in this study defined “cultural encounter” within the context of the short-term study abroad program; therefore, the definition of this term will be elucidated in chapter 4 when the findings of this study are presented. When the

¹⁰ It should be noted that I consider language learning as a component of culture-specific learning, as do Paige et al. (2003).

term “cultural encounter” is used in this study, it refers to the 10 letter narratives that students wrote during the program.

- 5) Study abroad: An educational experience that allows students to spend a specified amount of time in another country while earning academic credit.
- 6) Study abroad program: One specific, established study abroad experience.
- 7) Short-term study abroad: For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the Institute for International Education’s (IIE)¹¹ definition that a short-term study abroad experience lasts 8 weeks or less.
- 8) Longer-term study abroad: Any study abroad program that lasts longer than 8 weeks.
- 9) Learner, student, and program participant: These terms are used interchangeably in this dissertation to refer to a person who participates in a study abroad program.
- 10) Home culture: For the purposes of this dissertation, this term refers to the culture(s) of the country of one’s origin.
- 11) Host culture: For the purposes of this dissertation, this term refers to the culture(s) of a country that one is visiting.

¹¹ <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org>

Assumptions

The following are assumptions I held during research of the current study:

- 1) Culture learning can and should become an explicit, conscious activity during a short-term study abroad program.
- 2) Students' cultural encounter letters accurately reflect students' perceptions of the occurrence about which they wrote at the time they wrote the letter narrative.

Contribution to the Field

This study is a contribution to the small amount of existing research on students' experiences and perceptions during a short-term study abroad program and can reshape our thinking about the short-term duration. In documenting how students define, experience, and perceive their self-identified cultural encounters in the context of a short-term language and culture program, this study shows that such a program is a valid, rewarding, and enriching study abroad experience. Additionally, by highlighting the need and providing ideas for making culture learning a more explicit endeavor during a short-term study abroad program, this study can influence current study abroad practices before, during, and after students' experiences abroad.

Limitations of the Study

- 1) Because this study focuses on the experiences and perceptions of one group of students during one study abroad program, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population in the way that many quantitative studies can. Additional studies similar to the current one need to be undertaken in order to establish such generalizability. Moreover, individual readers of this research can generalize the

findings to their own contexts as they find applicable.

- 2) While I view language and culture as inextricably linked, and therefore language learning essential to culture learning, this study does not explicitly investigate language learning outside of instances in which it was deemed salient to students' experiences or perceptions.

Organization of Study

This dissertation contains five chapters. In the following chapter, the literature review, I discuss perspectives of culture learning and relevant study abroad research. In chapter 3, I describe the general research perspective, as well as delineate data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the research findings. Finally, chapter 5 presents and discusses conclusions, conceptualizes culture learning during short-term study abroad, and offers recommendations for practice.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW: A CONTEXT FOR INQUIRY

The current study explores how undergraduate students made sense of their daily cultural encounters as they participated in a short-term study abroad program. This literature review therefore seeks to address current thinking on the following questions:

- What is culture learning?
- What do we know about students' experiences with culture learning while on a longer-term study abroad program?
- What do we know about the short-term study abroad experience?

In order to explore the above-mentioned questions, elaborate on terminology used in this dissertation, and provide a context for inquiry for the current study, I will review the relevant literature regarding culture learning and study abroad research.¹²

This literature review is divided into two main sections. First, I discuss models of culture learning and clarify the terminology central to this study. In the second section, I review study abroad research, paying particular attention to short-term study abroad.

Culture Learning

Generally speaking, culture learning is a psychologically and emotionally intense process of discovery, response, and change that occurs as learners recognize and revise their worldview orientation. Rooted in learners' experiences and interactions with another

¹² It is important to note that studies addressing intercultural competence, or any variations on this concept, will not be discussed in this literature review, as it is beyond the scope of the current study. While intercultural competence is certainly an important outcome of culture learning, my dissertation does not seek to measure or assess specific outcomes of culture learning during study abroad. Rather, this study aims to document students' experiences and perceptions during a study abroad program.

culture and its people, culture learning centers on learners' encounters with cultural differences and their reactions, reflections, and responses to such encounters.

There is no specific model that explicitly addresses culture learning during a short-term study abroad experience. There are, however, aspects of five models that contribute to an understanding of culture learning. In the following sections, I will present and discuss each of the following models. First, Bennett (1993) provides a developmental roadmap of what he terms intercultural sensitivity. Second, Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, and Colby's (2003) conceptual model describes the dimensions of culture learning in a way that is applicable to the content and goals of a language and culture study abroad program. Third, Kim's (1988) model sheds light on the dynamics of the culture learning process that is based on repeated encounters with cultural differences during a sojourn abroad. Fourth, Moran's (2001) model offers ideas regarding how culture learning can be made a conscious and explicit process in the foreign language classroom, and, I posit, a language and culture study abroad program. Fifth, Hess (1997) describes the attitudes and character traits that seem to promote culture learning, and offers a strategy for learning in and from an intercultural environment. I also highlight issues that need to be addressed or clarified with regard to each perspective presented.

Mapping a Journey

Bennett's (1993) "Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity" (DMIS) is frequently used in intercultural education and training (Cohen, Paige, Kappler, Demmessie, Weaver, Chi & Lassegard, 2003, p. 63). This model was also the basis for the often used Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI).¹³ I am including the DMIS in

¹³ The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) was developed by Mitchell R. Hammer, Ph.D. and Milton Bennett, Ph.D.

my theoretical framework because it provides a view of the long-term process of dealing with cultural differences, which is an aspect of culture learning; however, as I will explain, this is also why this popular model is not as useful to the current study as the other perspectives I present.

Bennett defines intercultural sensitivity as “stages of personal growth” (p. 22). The DMIS describes learners’ subjective experience with cultural differences. This model states that learners progress through a continuum of six sequential stages as they increase their “sophistication in dealing with cultural difference, moving from ethnocentrism through stages of greater recognition and acceptance of difference, here termed ‘ethnorelativism’” (p. 22). Learners first move through three ethnocentric stages (denial, defense, and minimization). After a significant shift in their attitudes, learners then progress through three ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, and integration). As learners move from denying to accepting cultural differences, they engage in a cycle of thinking, feeling, and then doing. This model also describes the strategies that learners characteristically employ in reacting to and dealing with cultural differences as they move through the developmental stages. The outcome of this model is not merely an ethnorelative view of a specific culture, but rather an ethnorelative view of culture and oneself. It should be noted that while a continuum model inherently implies a linear one-way progression, Bennett stresses that the developmental process is multidimensional. It is thus possible, for example, for learners to progress, digress, and regress along the continuum.

What the DMIS offers is a way to understand and map out learners’ subjective experiences with cultural differences. The DMIS could thus be used to explain to study

abroad students that the culture learning journey is long, not necessarily linear, and will continue well beyond their study abroad experience. From this model students could discover what they can expect to experience as they learn about another culture, and how people typically think, feel, and react at different stages. The DMIS could also be a useful tool for assessing, identifying, and understanding study abroad students' starts, stops, and general progress along the continuum. For example, in *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Language Instructors' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use*¹⁴ (Cohen, Paige, Kappler, Demmessie, Weaver, Chi & Lassegard, 2003), the DMIS is presented as a way to facilitate culture learning. Specifically, it suggests using the DMIS to assess learners' current location in the developmental process, and offers teaching strategies for meeting learners' needs at each stage that can aid in their progression to the next stage.

The DMIS is, however, of limited use in conceptualizing culture learning in the short-term study abroad context. First, the DMIS does not specifically address culture learning; rather it focuses on intercultural sensitivity, which could be viewed as an aspect or outcome of culture learning. Nor does the model explain how students can consciously and purposefully engage in culture learning. Instead, the model is intended to be used to diagnose stages of development. Additionally, progressing to the next defined stage in the continuum could take significantly longer than might be possible during a short-term study abroad program. Two studies, for example, found that the majority of short-term

¹⁴ The *Maximizing Study Abroad: Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use* guides for program professionals, language instructors, and study abroad students were created by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota. More information about the guides can be found at <http://www.carla.umn.edu/maxsa/>. See bibliography for citations.

study abroad students did not progress to the next level of intercultural sensitivity¹⁵ (Medina-López–Portillo, 2004; Stephenson, 2002). Interestingly, Medina-López–Portillo also noted that the qualitative data collected in her study identified more development than the quantitative data collected with the IDI. Thus, the progress that might occur during a brief sojourn abroad could potentially be overlooked since it seems that most learners do not progress to the subsequent stage in the continuum. Moreover, Bennett suggests that reaching the latter stages on the continuum could take at least two years, depending on the abroad experience (p. 55).

Conceptualizing Culture Learning

Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein & Colby's (2003) culture learning model provides insight into how culture learning can be conceptualized, as it describes the dimensions of culture learning and the components of each dimension. This model provides a language with which to articulate the components and goals of culture learning that speak to both a language and culture study abroad program and the short-term duration.

Serving as a benchmark for assessing articles for a literature review on culture learning in language education, the model emerged from a culmination of several scholars' ideas regarding culture and language teaching. Paige et al. depict culture learning as an ongoing dynamic process that encompasses not only learning about the target culture, but also developing knowledge and skills of phenomena generalizable to any intercultural experience, termed culture-specific and culture-general learning respectively. Underlying this model is the view that culture is always changing, because culture is constructed by interaction and communication between people who exhibit a

¹⁵ Intercultural sensitivity is defined and measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) developed by Mitchell R. Hammer, Ph.D. and Milton Bennett, Ph.D. The instrument is based on the developmental model described earlier.

wide range of value orientations and behaviors. It is therefore not enough to simply accumulate a set of facts about a specific culture. Rather, it is equally important to be able to learn about and from any cultural context. Also, language is central to culture, as language is used to both transmit and shape culture.

This model posits that both culture-general and culture-specific learning are valuable and required components of culture learning because culture-general outcomes “constitute the larger learning framework within which target culture learning occurs” (p. 177). Therefore, culture-general learning must occur in order to foster the successful learning of the target culture, which includes language learning. This model asserts that both culture-general and culture-specific learning involve the cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains.

Paige et al. do not plot out a specific roadmap for developing and employing culture-general and culture-specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Rather, they contend that culture learning should include five specific dimensions, which are as follows (as presented in Cohen, Paige, Kappler, Demmessie, Weaver, Chi & Lassegard, 2003):

1. Learning about the self as cultural:
 - a. Understanding that every person is influenced by culture and has a culture.
 - b. Gaining cultural self-awareness (gaining an understanding of one’s own cultural values).
2. Learning about the elements of culture:
 - a. Investigating values, beliefs, attitudes, and customs.
 - b. Considering different learning styles and communication styles.

- c. Examining culture group history, products, and artifacts (such as technology, music, the arts – the sum total of what a group of people create together, share, and seek to transmit to the next generation).
- 3. Learning about intercultural phenomena (culture-general learning):
 - a. Learning about culture shock, cultural adaptation, cultural adjustment, and other phenomena that occur when people cross cultures.
 - b. Learning that people in different cultures interpret the same events differently.
 - c. Learning what it means to be interculturally competent and an effective culture learner.
- 4. Learning about a particular culture (culture-specific learning):
 - a. Understanding characteristics of a particular culture.
 - b. Examining and learning the constellation of values, patterns of thought and behavior, language, history, geography, political system, economic system, the arts, literature, and other things that define the specific cultural community.
- 5. Acquiring strategies for culture learning:
 - a. Learning from cultural informants.
 - b. Developing the skills of cultural observation and hypothesis-testing.
 - c. Investigating culture through books, newspapers, and websites.
 - d. Learning how to apply the model of experiential learning that encourages a cycle of action and reflection for learning.

A key aspect of this model of culture learning is its emphasis on the importance of the fifth dimension, namely learning how to learn from the cultural context in which one is immersed. This is a crucial component of culture learning, as it enables learners to develop culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, behavior and attitudes, and manage the culture learning process as they engage in it. It is, however, one that is often overlooked. In discussing how learners learn how to learn, Paige et al. draw on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. Kolb suggests that knowledge is gained through experience, and proposes a model of learning from a novel experience that includes the following four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and activity experimentation. Learners can begin the cycle at any stage but must proceed through all four before experience is transformed into knowledge. As learners continuously repeat this cycle, they increase their knowledge and exhibit more sophisticated behaviors. Learners should also develop and appropriately employ learning strategies.

This model provides insight into the components of culture learning that short-term programs could address, and highlights the need for study abroad students to learn how to learn on their own in any cultural context. The culture learning dimensions provide a way to determine the components of culture learning that are already addressed and need to be addressed during a short-term program. For example, culture-specific learning is certainly addressed; however, the culture-general dimension or learning how to learn might need additional attention. Moreover, this model stresses the importance of culture-general learning in addition to culture-specific learning, and notes the necessity of language learning in culture learning. However, beyond discussing the experiential

learning cycle, this model does not explain how culture learning occurs or how learners can or should actually engage in culture learning. What is more, this model does not address culture learning in the study abroad context.

The Dynamics of Culture Learning

Kim's (1988) "Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic" (see Figure 1) offers a description of the process that learners go through when confronted with cultural differences abroad. This model is also the basis of Moran's (2001) model that will be discussed following this section.

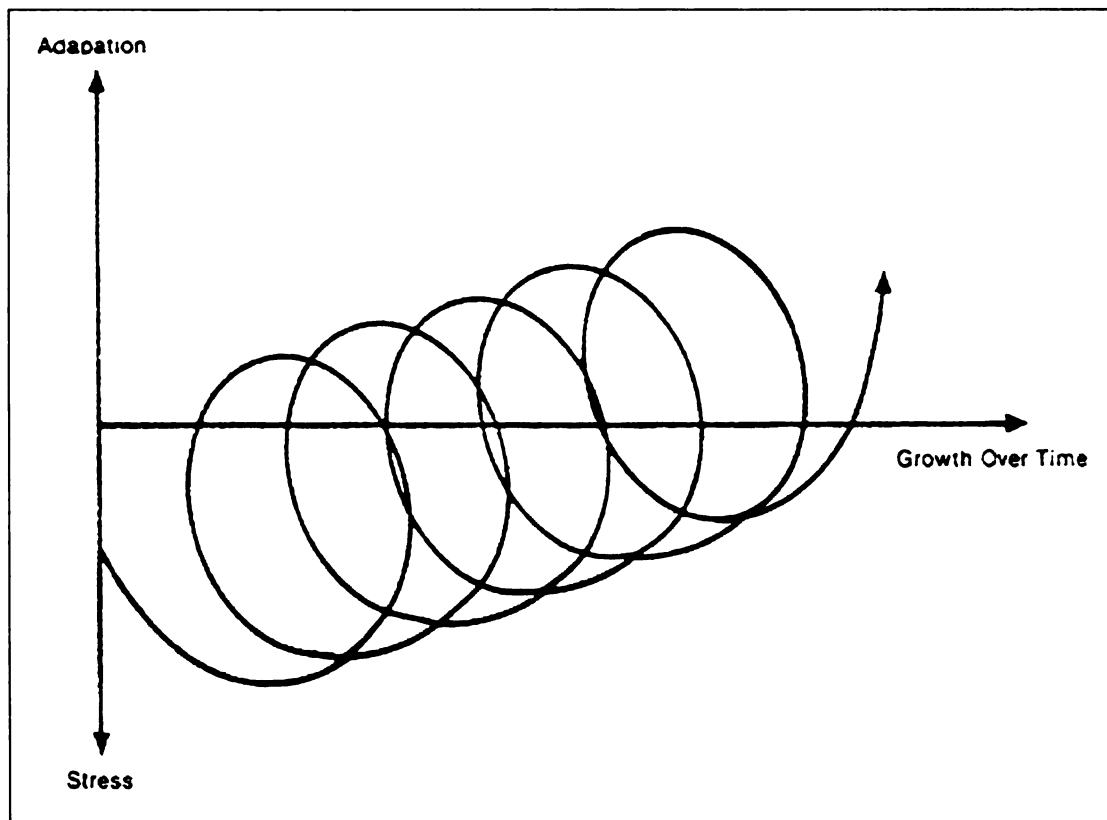


Figure 1. Stress-adaptation-growth dynamic (Kim, 1988, p. 56). Reprinted with permission.

Kim's model is based on the process of acculturation and deculturation that learners go through in adapting to another culture. Acculturation involves learning and acquiring elements of the host culture that are unfamiliar to a learner. As learners become enculturated into the host culture, they engage in deculturation, which involves unlearning or undoing home culture patterns to the extent that in the appropriate contexts, host culture patterns are evoked and employed instead of the home culture ones. Kim posits that this process of acculturation and deculturation causes learners disequilibrium and stress. Confronted by stress, learners automatically attempt to restore their inner balance. Because this reaction is instinctive, learners tend to react to the frustration, anxiety, and suffering they experience by, for example, exhibiting hostile feelings toward the host culture, retreating into the home culture, or avoiding problems altogether. It is this stress that provides "the impetus for adaptive personal transformation and growth – the learning and creative responses to manage new cultural circumstances" (p. 56).

Kim's model does not identify explicit stages or a final destination of culture learning that learners attempt to reach. Instead, Kim proposes a model of the dynamic process of stress, adaptation, and growth that occurs when learners confront cultural differences. Because this process is cyclic and continual, Kim likens it to a wheel that turns as it moves forward. As learners repeatedly cycle through stress and adaptation, they simultaneously and consistently move towards the goal of increased growth. As this cycle repeats itself, learners develop new, and lose irrelevant, ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving, which results in the aptitude to create new ways of viewing the host culture. As learners progress towards growth, they become increasingly more skilled at adapting to the host culture, which in turn enables them to better handle the stress caused

by cultural differences, which furthers adaptation to the host culture. This is viewed as an on-going and unavoidable process. Kim also notes that the speed and efficacy with which learners proceed through this process depends on factors relating to the learner and the host culture. For example, language ability, a receptive host culture environment, and learner readiness to adapt are three crucial factors. Language ability is crucial because this model posits that being able to communicate with members of another culture is paramount to learning the cultural patterns of that culture.

This model offers a way to understand the cyclic process that learners go through when they are confronted with cultural differences during study abroad, and suggests that because students need to be confronted by stress in order to grow, study abroad programs should present opportunities that create disequilibrium. Kim's model, however, does not specifically address the study abroad context. Additionally, Kim describes how learners react to cultural differences, rather than explaining how learners can actively learn about another culture.

Making Culture Learning Explicit

Moran (2001) explains how culture learning can be made a conscious and explicit practice of processing encounters with cultural differences in the foreign language classroom. Based on Kim's (1988) model, Moran's culture learning in the classroom model (see Figure 2) follows the four stages of the experiential learning cycle (e.g. concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and activity experimentation).

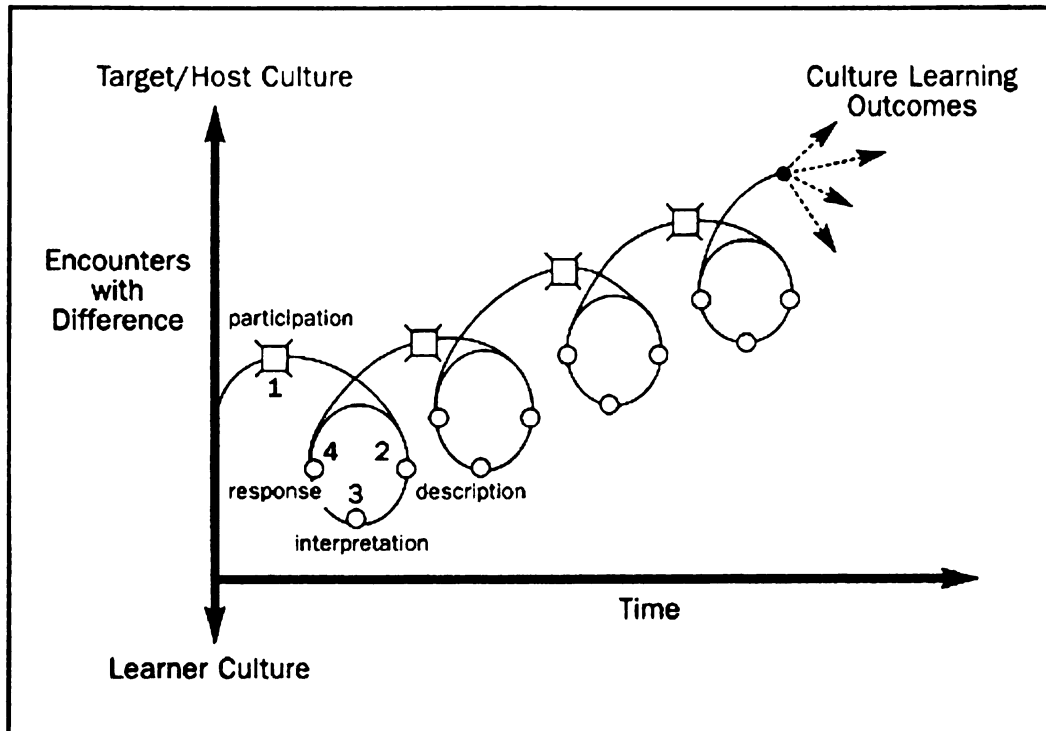


Figure 2. Culture learning in the classroom (Moran, 2001, p. 124). From Teaching Culture, Perspectives in Practice 1st edition by MORAN. 2001. Reprinted with permission of Heinle, a division of Thompson Learning: www.thomsonrights.com. Fax 800 730-2215.

Moran explains that consciously processing cultural differences requires the following elements. Learners must be repeatedly presented with cultural differences that highlight various aspects of the host culture's products, practices, and perspectives. The presentation of such cultural differences should spark an emotional reaction in learners. The instructor then leads learners through a process of describing, interpreting, and then responding to the cultural differences. After repeatedly being confronted with cultural differences and guided through an explicit learning process, Moran suggests that learners

will “acquire more knowledge of the target culture, develop more appropriate linguistic and cultural behaviors, attain greater understanding, and enhance their awareness of their own culture, their intentions, and their competence as culture learners” (p. 125). Moran explains that his model is rooted in several assumptions about culture learning in a classroom environment (p. 125-127):

- 1) Culture learning can be a conscious, purposeful process.
- 2) Culture learning requires managing emotions.
- 3) Culture learning depends on cultural comparisons.
- 4) Culture learning requires making the tacit explicit.
- 5) Learner characteristics affect culture learning.
- 6) The relationship between the learner’s culture and the target culture affects culture learning.
- 7) The instructional context affects culture learning.
- 8) The teacher-student relationship affects learning.

While Moran’s model was designed for processing cultural differences through indirect contact with the target culture in the foreign language classroom, there are aspects of his model that are applicable to the short-term language and culture study abroad context. First, Moran provides a way for faculty leaders or other program instructors to actively guide students in processing their experiences with the cultural differences they encounter while abroad. Program leaders and instructors are in a position to “help learners bring their experiences to the surface, to expression and articulation, so that they can decide how to respond to the culture” (p. 124). Second, the assumptions underlying Moran’s model of culture learning also provide information about the factors

that can positively or negatively influence students' culture learning, and should be considered when developing a short-term study abroad program.

Attitudes, Character Traits, and a Learning Strategy

The final perspective on culture learning comes from Hess (1997), who suggests that engaging in culture learning, which he defines as “the effort to gain insight into how cultural strangers live” (p. 9), propels learners through the adjustment process by helping them overcome culture shock. Hess also states that culture learning is a “process of growth and transformation” (p. 12). Stating that “not all travelers come naturally to culture learning” (p. 1), Hess presents information specifically intended to help study abroad students face the challenges inherent to a sojourn abroad. Useful to this theoretical framework are the attitudes and traits that Hess identifies as being crucial to effective culture learning, and his action-reflection-response strategy that learners can use to help them learn about and from cultural differences.

Hess identifies four attitudes that advance culture learning. First, learners should possess a high regard for culture, meaning that a learner “sees the diversity of peoples on the earth as a good and the social dynamic that produces that diversity as a valuable and productive force” (p. 15). Second, learners should be enthusiastic about learning and willing to be changed by the abroad experience (p. 15). Third, learners should want to establish connections with members of their host country (p. 16). Fourth, learners should see their sojourn not just for personal gain, but also as an opportunity for mutual sharing between them and their hosts (p. 17). Hess also identifies several character traits that seem to be necessary for effective culture learning, such as being curious, trusting, laid-back, flexible, motivated, and able to tolerate ambiguity (p. 19-21).

Hess also proposes what he calls the action-reflection-response strategy (p. 27) as a method of culture learning abroad. This strategy, which he notes is essentially experiential learning, comprises three components that are completed in sequence. First, the learner engages in some sort of action or activity. Then, the learner engages in the process of reflecting on the activity. Hess explains that “this is the process of attaining greater knowledge of something as a result of thinking through the action, a process made possible through gaining more information about, assimilating, and accepting ownership of the experience” (p. 28). Finally, the learner responds by changing his or her attitudes or behaviors. Hess stresses that opportunities for culture learning abound while abroad, even in routine experiences.

As a way of illustrating how to employ the action-reflection-response-strategy Hess describes how study abroad students can review critical events.

Most travelers abroad don’t have to be coaxed to tell stories of their encounters with the strange and foreign, ranging from asking incorrectly for food in a restaurant to accidentally insulting an important official. What is less usual, however, is a systematic study of these misadventures. It is here that our instant replay comes in. (p. 29)

Hess suggests that learners follow four steps in reviewing a critical event. First, the learner needs to identify what the event was. Then, the learner should reconstruct the event by re-telling how the learner experienced and felt about it. The third step involves obtaining information about the event from others so that the learner can see the event from a new perspective. Finally, the learner interprets the critical event in a new way and possibly modifies his or her behaviors.

Hess offers information that could be useful in describing to study abroad students the attitudes and character traits they should cultivate, and the action-reflection-response-

strategy provides a framework that study abroad students could use in exploring the cultural differences they encounter while abroad. Hess also includes numerous activities and ways of applying the action-reflection-response-strategy in myriad “Guides to the Culture-Learning Process.” Additionally, it is certainly useful that Hess directly addresses the study abroad student in his writing. However, Hess does not specifically address the short-term study abroad experience. His ideas assume, for example, that learners will interact enough with host nationals that there will be critical events to analyze. While the information and activities Hess presents may very well be useful to a student studying abroad for a semester or academic year, for the short-term study abroad student it could be overwhelming and may not speak to students’ immediate needs and experiences.

Summary

Although there is no model of culture learning that specifically addresses the short-term study abroad context, aspects of the perspectives presented in this theoretical frame each contribute to an understanding of culture learning.

- Bennett (1993): Describes learners’ subjective experiences with cultural differences; maps out process of developing what could be an outcome of culture learning
- Paige et al. (2003): Outlines the dimensions and goals of culture learning; stresses the importance of culture-general learning and learning how to learn in and from any cultural context
- Kim (1988): Presents a cyclic and continual process of how learners manage repeated encounters with cultural differences
- Moran (2001): Offers steps for guiding learners through explicit

processing of cultural differences in the language learning classroom; stresses the importance of the instructional context

- Hess (1997): Identifies attitudes and character traits thought to be conducive to culture learning; presents a culture learning method for study abroad

For the purpose of the current study, I use Paige et al.'s definition of culture learning.

Culture learning is the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively. (p. 177)

Specifically, I view culture learning as the active endeavor to learn not only about the host culture, but also the home culture, and to develop strategies to learn better about both of them. I suggest that culture learning can and should become an explicit activity, and that the process can be guided by, for example, a faculty leader or other program instructor.

The perspectives on culture learning discussed in the theoretical framework raise several questions with respect to the short-term study abroad context. What are reasonable culture learning goals during a short-term study abroad program? What should culture learning look like during such a program? How might the program design and activities help or hinder culture learning? How can those in charge of a short-term program guide students in culture learning? These questions will be addressed in later sections of this study.

Study Abroad Research

According to Laubscher (1994), when Weaver (1989) assembled a bibliography containing over 250 study abroad research entries, many of these entries “listed under the rubric of ‘research’ [were] actually something other than the presentation of research findings” (p. 7). Since then, the body of substantive research on study abroad has significantly increased. There exists, for example, a sizeable amount of language-focused research^{16,17,18}, perhaps because language learning has traditionally been the prime learning domain associated with a sojourn abroad.

As study abroad opportunities have expanded to include multiple disciplines (e.g. engineering programs in Russia, business in Taiwan, nursing in London, etc.) and reduced the focus on language learning, study abroad research has become increasingly interdisciplinary. Thus, myriad topics relating to many types of study abroad experiences have been investigated from several perspectives: longitudinal study of a student’s adjustment (e.g. Bacon, 2002); the abroad experience of women and under-represented students (e.g. Twombly, 1995; Van Der Meid, 2003); perspectives on living with a host family (e.g. Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004), use of ethnographic methods in learning abroad (e.g. Jurasek, Lamson & O’Maley, 1996), experiential education during study abroad (e.g. Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002;

¹⁶ Numerous aspects of language learning have been explored, such as predicting and measuring gains in oral, aural, written, and reading modalities, comparing study abroad students with home university students, student perceptions of language learning abroad, sociolinguistic and (meta-)pragmatic aspects, and language use (e.g. Kaplan, 1989; DyKeyser, 1991; Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg, 1993; Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Freed, 1995; Freed, 1998; Kline, 1998; Regan, 1998; Rivers, 1998; Isabelli-Garcia, 2003; Segalowitz, Freed, Collentine, Lafford, Lazar & Díaz-Campos, 2004; Smartt & Scudder, 2004; Kinginger & Farrell, 2004; Mendelson, 2004). Much of this research has focused on semester and academic-year programs.

¹⁷ Kinginger (2005) offers a detailed bibliography of language learning research from 1998-2005. In this bibliography, over 80 entries are categorized into four sections: “language development,” “the qualities of learners’ interactions and experiences in the host community,” “writings on program design and intervention,” and “web resources.”

¹⁸ Pellegrino (1998) details the small amount of research that has been conducted on student perspectives on language learning during study abroad.

Montrose, 2002; Steinberg, 2002), the impact and outcomes of study abroad on student learning and future aspirations (e.g. Farrell & Suvedi, 2003; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Orahood, Kruze & Pearson, 2004; Rundstrom-Williams, 2005; Stronkhorst, 2005; Sutton & Rubin, 2004; Van de Berg, Balkcum, Scheid & Whalen, 2004), factors influencing the study abroad experience (Merva, 2003); study abroad program classification and evaluation (Engle & Engle, 2003; Gillespie, Braskamp & Braskamp, 1999); curricular interventions (DiBiasio & Mello, 2004; Engle & Engle, 2004; Trooboff, Cressey & Monty, 2004), and others. Additionally, there are numerous editorials and descriptions of practice that summarize the implementation, administration, and logistics of programs (e.g. Archangeli, 1999; Bolen, 2001; Brandt & Manley, 2002; Chen, 2002; Davis & Mello, 2003; Day, 1987; Foster, 2001; Levy, 2000; Milleret, 1990; Shannon, 1995).

While there is currently a burgeoning amount of study abroad research, the majority of existing research explores semester or academic-year programs, focuses on identifying specific learning outcomes measured by pre-post tests, and other issues that are not specifically related to the current study. Very few studies have investigated shorter durations or students' perceptions and experiences during a program. To my knowledge, none have explored students' perceptions of and experiences with self-identified cultural encounters during a short-term language and culture program.

In this section of the literature review, I discuss research focusing on students' experiences during longer-term study abroad. Then I discuss short-term study abroad research. Finally, I explain the research gap this dissertation seeks to fill.

Longer-Term Study Abroad

In exploring students' experiences and perceptions during semester and academic-year study abroad programs, some studies have shed light on the complexity of adjusting to and learning another culture, and consequently questioned long-held assumptions about study abroad programs and the automatic effects of a study abroad experience on participants. The studies presented in this section suggest that students are not fully aware of, nor adequately prepared for, the challenges of adapting to and learning another culture during a semester or academic year program.

Laubscher's (1994) seminal study offers much insight into students' perceptions of the role of out-of-class experiences in their learning abroad. In this qualitative case study, Laubscher interviewed 30 students who studied in locations around the world for one semester or academic year. As Laubscher hypothesized, students naturally used ethnographic methods in learning about their host culture while abroad. For example, students employed participant observation in contexts such as the host family, organized social activities, and informal day-to-day activities like shopping. Students also used native informant interviewing. Key informants were often host parents, and students also obtained information from casual interactions with friends and strangers. The third activity that Laubscher found salient to students' learning about their host culture was independent travel in the host and other countries, albeit to a lesser degree than participant observation and native informant interviewing.

Laubscher found that students did not possess the observational and analytical skills needed to get the most out of opportunities for participant observation. He also notes that students tended to overgeneralize from their cultural data, which was often

limited or even biased. Thus, Laubscher highlights the importance of making students aware of this risk, as “without such protection, students may simply substitute one stereotype for another and fail to gain any meaningful insight into the nature of the host culture” (p. 102). Laubscher also states that students typically “appeared to have difficulty moving from the level of concrete experience to that of abstract conceptualization” (p. 107); students were aware of differences but they did not seem to understand them. Therefore, Laubscher suggests that it is not enough to simply offer study abroad students opportunities for participant observation, native informant interviewing, or travel; instead, programs need to better prepare students for making sense of their experiences and better managing their potentially fruitful out-of-class learning opportunities.

Other studies focusing on the semester or academic year-long study abroad experience pinpoint the challenges that students face in adapting to and learning another culture. For example, in a study exploring, among other things, if and how 52 semester study abroad students’ pre-program expectations differed from their actual experiences abroad, Stephenson (1999) found that studying in Chile challenged students’ personal beliefs to a greater extent than anticipated. While students initially had language-related concerns, such as understanding Chilean professors, at the end of their study abroad program students indicated increased concern regarding their adjustment to “beliefs/values/cultural differences, social interactions and the university environment” (p. 11). From her findings garnered from the pre-and post-program questionnaires, Stephenson concludes that “cultural change” (p. 36) should not be assumed to automatically transpire as a result of participating in a study abroad program.

Stephenson (2002) suggests that a triad of variable factors influence students' ability to experience "cross-cultural deepening" while abroad: sojourner's personal factors, host culture characteristics, and study abroad program characteristics. She also stresses that those involved with study abroad must "acknowledge openly that real cross-cultural learning is stressful and difficult" (p. 99) so that students develop realistic expectations of the experience.

In a study on students' cultural adjustment during a semester in Madrid, Citron (2002) found that U.S. American students studying in Spain for a semester formed what he termed a "Third Culture" that was not quite Spanish nor quite U.S. American. Even though students lived with Spanish host families, the majority of program participants spent their 14 weeks abroad within the safety net of the group of U.S. American students, which hindered them from experiencing or exploring the host culture on more than a superficial level. Citron found that students lacked skills to negotiate the challenges of cultural adjustment and subsequently ignored such challenges, turning instead to their study abroad program peers. Thus, while the Third Culture offered students a comfortable and pleasing experience in Spain, many students did not demonstrate a struggle with "conflicting value orientations" (p. 52). Citron therefore advocates an on-site cultural orientation and a coordinator who can provide students with tools to understand cultural difference and encourage students to become more involved in the host culture.

Woolf (2001) questions the assumption that the immersion environment is always superior to the "island program." His assertion rests on the conviction that "proximity does not create integration" (p. 30) and that students need guidance in examining their experiences. Thus Woolf states that:

In short, the student may well need to have their experience ‘translated’ by a person or agency that understands difference and can mediate between conflicting notions of learning. For the U.S. student studying abroad, that mediation can be through a number of mechanisms, most commonly a resident director or accompanying faculty member, but the need for some form of mediation is apparent. (p. 30)

Recent research on the *Maximizing Study Abroad: Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use*¹⁹ guides indicates that students do indeed benefit from curricular interventions. Paige, Cohen and Shively (2004) found a statistically significant increase in students’ use of culture learning strategies during a semester abroad in students who had received and worked with an inventory of culture learning strategies. Moreover, Cohen, Paige, Shively, Emert, and Hoff (2005) found that students used at least some of the culture (and language) learning strategies in the *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Students’ Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use* volume while abroad, and expressed positive comments about the value of the information, activities, and strategies in the guide in helping them learn about the target culture and their own. Additionally, the researchers noted that students “were able to use specific terminology to describe complex cultural concepts they encountered in study abroad using terminology included in the *Guide*” (p. 180, emphasis original). This suggests that students could benefit from learning a meta-language that would help them understand and talk about their study abroad experiences.

¹⁹ The *Maximizing Study Abroad: Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use* guides for program professionals, language instructors, and study abroad students were created by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota. More information about the guides can be found at <http://www.carla.umn.edu/maxsa/>. See bibliography for citations.

Short-term Study Abroad

As short-term study abroad programs have become more popular, the amount of research on them has grown. While existing research illustrates conflicting assertions about short-term study abroad, they all demonstrate a desire to better understand these programs in order to justify and improve them. This section first presents recent studies focusing on the impact of short-term programs, and then discusses research on language and culture programs.

Impact of Short-term Study Abroad

Some recent studies have focused on articulating the impact of a short-term study abroad experience on participants, because “there is not much generalizable evidence to support the claim of study abroad’s life-changing benefits or even modest gains in cultural understanding or other qualities students are expected to acquire when they go overseas” (Chieffo & Griffeths, 2003, p. 27). Such impact studies suggest that short-term study abroad can have a positive effect on students in several meaningful ways.

In two large-scale questionnaire studies,^{20,21} Chieffo and Griffeths (2003, 2004) compared study abroad students’ perceived learning outcomes to those of students who remained on the U.S. institution’s home campus. Overall, their results indicated that the short-term study abroad experience “may have a significant impact on the international orientation of students” (2003, p. 31). Looking at the specific area of “global awareness,” which included the categories of intercultural awareness, personal growth and

²⁰ In Chieffo and Griffeths (2003), a questionnaire was completed by 600 study abroad students representing 32 programs and 400 home-campus students representing 32 sections of 22 courses.

²¹ In Chieffo and Griffeths (2004), a questionnaire was completed by 1,509 study abroad students representing 71 programs and 827 home-campus students representing 55 section of 28 courses.

development, awareness of global interdependence, and functional knowledge of world geography (2004, p. 167), also suggested positive outcomes. Chieffo and Griffiths found that the students in their study, who had spent one month abroad, were “more confident in their levels of intercultural awareness and functional knowledge than their peers who remained on campus” (2004, p. 175). Thus, they concluded that even short-term study abroad is a worthwhile endeavor and can have a significant impact on participants.

Similarly, in a longitudinal study investigating the correlation between specific program features²², such as program duration, and student outcomes, Dwyer (2004a) administered a survey to 3,723 alumni of the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) that was based on the IES Model Assessment Program categories of student learning environment, intercultural development, resources required for academic and student support, and program administration and development (p. 153). The findings of this study indicate that as far as program duration was concerned, short-term study abroad students “were as likely or more likely to achieve sustainable benefit from studying abroad in comparison with semester students” (p. 161). Dwyer therefore supports carefully-planned programs lasting at least six weeks.

In her case study of two cohorts of international business students who participated in a 3½ -week faculty led program in the Czech Republic, Zamastil-Vondrova (2005) also found that short-term study abroad has a positive impact on participants. This study specifically focused on participants’ construction of knowledge regarding linguistic awareness, cross-cultural perception, attitudinal reflection, and student perception of academic skill development. In what she characterized as a critical

²² Specific program features included language study, housing choice, duration of study, enrollment in foreign university courses, participation in an internship or field study, and others (p. 152-153).

discovery, Zamastil-Vondrova concluded that “the qualitative data illustrate that significant development took place – at least in the minds of the students. Although it may appear superficial, this is a critical discovery” (p. 46). For example, many students “emerged with a greater level of sensitivity and patience” (p. 46) with respect to linguistic and cultural awareness, managed challenges in their new environment, and learned about and made sense of culture from first-hand experiences. Zamastil-Vondrova argues that her study provided “powerful verification that students are capable of reflecting on their cultural experiences” (p. 49).

The aforementioned studies seem to lend credence to the good-faith assumption (Zamasil-Vondova, 2005) that participating in a short-term study abroad program is a worthwhile endeavor on various learning fronts. However, it is difficult to compare such studies, as they use such diverse terminology to describe the impact on students. Moreover, it should be noted that the aforementioned studies did not focus specifically on language and culture programs. In the following section, I address research on short-term language and culture study abroad.

Short-term Language and Culture Study Abroad

In recent research on short-term language and culture programs, concerns have been voiced that short programs are not long enough for students to “experience an ‘inside’ perspective or ‘gradual’ accretion of cultural discourse frames” (Talbert & Stewart 1999, p. 173) or attain cultural fluency (Einbeck, 2002, p. 60). Supporting these concerns is Willis-Allen & Herron’s (2003) finding that while students on a study abroad program in Paris made gains in oral and aural French skills, there was no real change in students’ attitudes towards the French after the study abroad program (p. 382). Similarly,

in a study centered on the link between development of intercultural sensitivity and program duration, Medina-López-Portillo (2004) found that the 7-week summer study abroad students in her study were less likely than the semester students to increase their intercultural sensitivity²³ (p. 185). Whereas two thirds of semester program students (67%) progressed to the next stage, less than one third (31%) of the summer program students did.

Wilkinson's (1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2002) landmark exploration of seven students' experiences during a summer language and culture program in France illustrated the complexity inherent to a study abroad experience and raises questions and concerns about long-held beliefs regarding the nature of the experience. Because students' experiences were different than their expectations, Wilkinson (1998a,b) challenged what she termed the "myths of study-abroad 'magic'" (p. 33) in arguing against the commonly held notions that students will improve linguistic and cultural fluency simply by being abroad, and that the host family is undoubtedly the favorable living arrangement that fosters such gains. Wilkinson (1998a, 2000) identified a startling disparity between the program recruitment literature and students' actual experiences. For example, Wilkinson found that students encountered cultural misunderstandings on a daily basis, "plaguing even the most basic exchanges and ultimately leading to negative stereotyping" (1998a, p. 30). Wilkinson (2000) posits that students' daily cross-cultural misunderstandings stemmed from their lack of awareness regarding differing norms between the U.S. and France, as opposed to language issues.

Without a native French perspective on their experiences, it seems that the participant could only interpret their encounters through American lenses, arriving

²³ As measured by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) developed by Mitchell R. Hammer, Ph.D. and Mitlon Bennett, Ph.D. The instrument is based on the developmental model described earlier.

logically at the conclusion that the French were “obstinate” or “unfriendly” (see Laubscher). Clearly then, *exposure* to cultural differences during an overseas stay does not necessarily translate into the cross-cultural understanding promised in the Collegiate Education Abroad *Handbook*. (p. 38, emphasis original)

Wilkinson (2002) underscored the lack of knowledge students seemed to have about cultural differences while noting that some students did recognize their need for such knowledge.

On the other hand, however, some studies focusing on language and culture programs highlight the positive learning experiences that the researchers recognized during the program. In an article discussing a 3-week “cultural immersion program” that was part of a third-semester French language course, Ingram (2005) noted that students’ journals, which were devoted to cultural differences between the U.S. and France, “contained broad generalizations, [however] they also represented a serious effort to begin thinking about cultural differences and the singularity of American identity in Europe (p. 218).”

Gmelch (1997) illustrates how weekend travel during a short-term study abroad program in Austria is “educational and contributes to personal growth” (p. 476), even though students’ “observations on the whole seemed naïve and simplistic” (p. 476). He argues that while students’ engagement in the host culture appeared superficial, their travel had a significant impact on students’ personal development. He also notes that travel presented students with many opportunities for problem solving, which required students to learn something about the culture in order to make good decisions and satisfy their needs. Gmelch thus points out that “for adolescents traveling on their own in a strange culture, these are significant life experiences” (p. 487). He also argued that had students not traveled, their days in Innsbruck would have become increasingly routine

and thus presented fewer challenges, problems to solve, decisions to make, and cultural differences of which to make sense.

A final study by Anderson (2003) points out that placing students in an isolated immersion environment to “sink or swim” is not the “optimum way of acquiring essential knowledge and skills for maximum cultural adjustment” (p. 39), nor is it realistic in a progressively more globalized world, and especially during a short-term study abroad program. Asserting that short-term programs should quickly engage students in learning host culture, she developed a heuristic culture learning model based on participant observation that helps learners uncover the host culture’s “cultural logic.” Anderson noticed gains in “cultural insight” in the five female students who participated in a winter session program in Costa Rica; however, Anderson does not present any conclusive results as to the efficacy of her model.

The Gap in the Research

As this literature review shows, although study abroad research is increasing and helping to articulate the complexities of the study abroad experience, it is currently a “patchwork of knowledge” (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2003, p. 27). Additional studies are clearly warranted, especially on the short-term study abroad context, as this duration is not only becoming the most popular study abroad option, but is also simply a very different experience from semester or academic-year programs. While existing studies provide a basis on which additional studies can build, current research on short-term study abroad seems to offer conflicting assertions about the experience. Moreover, there is a paucity of studies exploring students’ perceptions and experiences of and during language and culture study abroad programs. This dissertation helps fill the gap in the

research by exploring students' perceptions of and experiences with culture learning as students participate in a short-term study abroad program.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology and specific methods used in this study. I first give a brief overview of interpretive qualitative research methodology and ethnographic techniques. Then I provide an overview of the Mayen program and participants, in order to provide context for better understanding the themes presented in the findings chapter. Finally, I present and explain the purpose of the data sources and collection and analysis procedures.

General Research Perspective

This study is guided by an interpretive qualitative research methodology and, more specifically, ethnographic methods. Interpretive qualitative methodology seeks to not only explore, document, and describe the complexities of lived experience, but also understand a phenomenon from the participants' frame of reference as it occurs in the natural context. Interpretive qualitative researchers therefore want to understand "action," which refers to peoples' behavior and the "meaning interpretations held by the actor and those with whom the actor is engaged in action" (Erickson, 1986, p. 127). This focus on action, rather than merely behavior, is based on the assumption that people make sense of their environment, and more importantly that different people make sense in different ways. Action is explored and understood within a particular context, namely the natural context within which the phenomenon under investigation occurs. Thus, it is crucial to take into consideration both the emic and etic views and meanings, in order to understand the myriad layers and complexities inherent in any social context.

Because qualitative researchers are interested in a holistic understanding of a phenomenon, they collect data in the natural environment. In the field, the researcher can

observe action in context (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003). Often intensive and for a substantial period of time, fieldwork is a productive means for exploring “the relation between meaning-perspectives of actors and the ecological circumstances of action in which they find themselves” (Erickson, 1986, p. 127). The subjective meanings of the participants can be gathered through ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, conducting in-depth interviews, and gathering relevant documents, photographs, and artifacts. During and after fieldwork, these richly detailed descriptive data are systematically read and re-read, in order to develop ideas and generate meaning regarding participants’ experiences with, and views of, a particular phenomenon within a specific setting. The number of participants in a qualitative study is usually small in order to facilitate an in-depth investigation. While qualitative research findings are not generalizable in the way quantitative results are, qualitative findings offer an in-depth view of a particular phenomenon. Qualitative research is primarily concerned with “particularizability, rather than generalizability” (Erickson, 1986, p. 130).

Since this study sought to gain a holistic understanding of how students define, experience, and perceive daily cultural encounters within the context of the Mayen short-term study abroad program, interpretive qualitative research methodology and ethnographic methods are best suited for this investigation.

Methods: Delineating the Ethnographic Path

Research Questions

As stated in chapter 1, the main question I sought to answer with this study is as follows:

How did students define, experience, and perceive self-identified cultural encounters as they navigated the 2004 6-week Mayen study abroad program?

As also noted, I developed the following set of questions that guided me through data collection and analysis:

- 1) How do students describe cultural encounters in assigned written narratives?
 - a) What are the apparent criteria by which students select or identify a specific cultural encounter?
 - b) What is the content of the cultural encounters that students describe in assigned written narratives?
 - c) How does the content of students' cultural encounters change over time?
- 2) How do students interpret and analyze cultural encounters in assigned written narratives?
 - a) How do students' interpretations and analyses of cultural encounters change over time?
- 3) What seems to be the relationship between students' interpretations and analyses of cultural encounters and their assertions about another culture?
- 4) How do students explicitly define culture?
 - a) Do, and how do, these definitions change over time?
 - b) Where and how do students think they learn about culture?
 - c) Are, and how are, students' definitions reflected in students' stories about, and interpretations and analyses of, cultural encounters?
- 5) How do students critique their ways of selecting, describing, interpreting, and analyzing cultural encounters?

- a) Do, and how do, students view themselves as effective in negotiating, interpreting, and analyzing cultural encounters?

The Context: Study Abroad Program Overview

Sponsored by the Department of Linguistics, and Germanic, Slavic, Asian and African Languages at MSU, the 6-week Mayen program has been running for over 30 years. Informational documents note that the program “emphasizes living in the cultural environment rather than just visiting great monuments of the past and present.”²⁴ To that end, the faculty has planned for students to spend the first five weeks of the program learning German language and culture by attending German classes, participating in activities and excursions with Mayen residents, and living with a German host family. The final week is spent visiting Berlin and surrounding cities.

Students often attributed their selection of the Mayen program to the rave reviews from friends and classmates, and its compatibility with their curricular, financial, and personal needs and preferences. For example, students in the current study reported choosing the Mayen program because their academic requirements or limited finances did not allow for a semester or year abroad. The Mayen program offered German courses that students would otherwise need to complete at their home institution. Additionally, students noted a desire to live with a host family and reside in a small town. They were further enticed by the prospect of having three-day weekends for independent travel.

Program Site: Mayen, Germany

The program takes place each summer in Mayen, Germany, a town of 22,800 inhabitants, located in the Rhine Valley near Koblenz and not far from Cologne. Classes

²⁴ From the information sheet about the 2004 program that at the time of this study was available in the Office of Study Abroad at MSU.

are held in the Altes Rathaus (Old Town Hall), which is located in the center of town on the Marktplatz (town square). On and near the cobblestone Marktplatz are various small shops, restaurants, cafés, and bars. Mayen offers one movie theater, a swimming pool, and a variety of hiking and mountain biking trails. Nearly all of Mayen is easily accessible by foot or bicycle.

Program administrators seem to view Mayen's diminutive size as a positive aspect of the program. According to the program information sheet:²⁵

A smaller town offers a better chance to get to know the people, their customs, and their language. In Mayen, our students have the opportunity to develop personal relationships, as well as to experience daily life in Germany. By feeling welcome where they are studying, previous students have ventured from there and visited other places of interest.

Students seem to hold a similar view, as they assumed that there would be fewer tourists and little English spoken in Mayen, therefore surmising that they would not only have increased opportunities to speak German, but also a more authentic German experience.

Living Arrangements

Living with local host families is considered a “highlight of the program and a way to immerse yourself in the German language and culture”²⁶ by the program administration. Students seem to perceive the host family as an important vehicle for learning. Living with a German family is often a factor that draws students to the Mayen program. In fact, 13 out of 18 students ranked “living with a German host family” as the

²⁵ From the information sheet about the 2004 program that at the time of this study was available in the Office of Study Abroad at MSU.

²⁶ From the information sheet about the 2004 program that at the time of this study was available in the Office of Study Abroad at MSU.

optimal way to learn the German language while in Mayen; 15 out of 18 ranked the host family arrangement as the best way to learn about German culture.²⁷

All host families live within walking distance of the Altes Rathaus, where classes are held. While most families host two students at a time, during the 2004 program three families hosted only one student, and one family hosted three students simultaneously. Host situations varied in composition; some students lived with married parents who had school-aged children, while others lived with a single elderly widow. Families lived in houses, townhouses, and apartments of various sizes, thus offering a variety of lodgings, from separate apartments to single rooms within the family's living quarters.

The Mayen program information sheet notes that only breakfast is included in the host family fee; students are therefore on their own for all other meals. Consequently, students typically eat lunch and dinner together at inexpensive restaurants in Mayen. It is up to each host family to decide how much contact they have with students. Some host families invited students to join meals, family activities, or day trips to visit sights around Mayen, while others provided an environment that students often found resembled a boarding house.

Program Leadership

The Mayen program is typically led each year by a member of the MSU German faculty, who determines student selection, and organizes pre-departure meetings, host families, and on-site activities and excursions with the support of the Office of Study Abroad and the Mayen Verkehrsamt (Tourist Office). The 2004 faculty leader was Dr.

²⁷ From pre-departure questionnaires.

Bauer,²⁸ a former MSU professor who at the time of the Mayen program was Assistant Professor at a private Midwestern college. In addition to having directed other study abroad programs to Germany, Dr. Bauer had served as faculty leader for the Mayen program both during and after his tenure at MSU. The program also hires a native speaker from the Mayen community to co-lead and teach with the faculty leader. During the 2004 program Dr. Schmidt taught for the second year with the Mayen program.

Admissions, Requirements, Academics, and Program Schedule

The Mayen program is open to students of all majors who have a minimum 2.00 GPA, have completed four semesters of college German or the equivalent, and are in good academic standing.²⁹ In some cases, students who have completed three semesters of German are admitted. Although participants are typically MSU students, the program is open to students from other institutions; the 2004 program admitted five non-MSU students. Students wishing to participate in the program complete a study abroad application form and return it to MSU's Office of Study Abroad and then later participate in an interview in German with the current faculty leader.

During the 2004 program all students registered for at least six upper-division semester credits. Once in Mayen, students were divided into two classes based on German language ability. According to the syllabi that Dr. Bauer distributed to students at the beginning of the 2004 Mayen program, the 3-credit "GRM: 325, Third year German (Oral Communication)" course:

Concentrates on culture and "every day" German language. Students will hone their linguistic abilities while discussing themes ranging from the definition and meaning of culture, cultural differences between Germany and the United States,

²⁸ All names have been changed to provide anonymity.

²⁹ Program requirements as stated on the 2004 program information sheet.

and many themes pertaining to contemporary Germany. In addition, students learn how to use language in specific situations, e.g., in the bakery or post office, and continue to hone their grammar.

The 3-credit “GRM: 420, Advanced German” course was described on the course syllabus as follows:

It introduces students to aspects of contemporary German media while focusing on topics concerning German culture, history, politics, and economy. Students read and analyze print media, compare and contrast German and America [sic] media sources, present short reports on their findings, and write 3-4 short papers. The entire course is contextualized within contemporary culture with which students will become increasingly more familiar.

These language and culture classes, for which students earn three credits, met for three hours a day, Monday through Thursday, and were taught each day by both Drs. Bauer and Schmidt. Students’ grades, in both classes, were evaluated equally on class participation and written assignments.

All students also enrolled in the 3-credit “GRM 491: Special Topics in German Studies.” For this course students engaged in a variety of pre-determined activities and excursions in and around Mayen, such as touring a castle and visiting a near-by monastery, and participated in the week-long trip to Berlin. Students were also required to keep a daily journal, in which they record their impressions and experiences in German. Not only do such journals give students a forum for practicing their language skills, they also afford the faculty leader the opportunity to glean insights into students’ feelings and observations about their experiences.

During the 2004 program, the cultural encounter letters that were part of data collection for the current study were included as a requirement for the GRM 491 course. On Dr. Bauer’s course syllabus it was explained that, “On separate paper, students will

write two letters per week in English about cultural encounters while in Europe. Students will not receive a numerical grade; rather just credit.” Additionally, every year students also have the option of pursuing an independent study, thus earning more than the required six credits, which must be organized with the faculty leader prior to the onset of the program.

Dr. Bauer introduced during the 2004 program some new events to the program calendar, because previous program participants have lamented feeling isolated and thus recommended increasing opportunities for contact with Germans their own age. Therefore, in addition to activities such as meeting the mayor, taking a Mayen city tour, and having dinner with the local Rotary Club, changes included visits to the local Gymnasium (college preparatory high school) and the University of Koblenz, as well as a Kegelabend (bowling evening) with local Mayen high school students.

With the exception of the first weekend, students are free to travel during each of their 3- to 4-day weekends. As the Mayen program requires students to purchase a Eurail pass to use during the group trip to Berlin, students typically buy a pass that allows them to travel in Germany and neighboring countries. During the 2004 program, students traveled to locations such as Munich, Hamburg, Zurich, Budapest, the Cinque Terre, Paris, and Amsterdam. Every year, during the sixth and final week of the program, the faculty leader takes the entire group to Berlin and other various cities in the vicinity. Since students arrange their own travel plans to and from Germany and are not required to book a seat on the group flight, students are free to travel independently before or after the study abroad program.

Program Participants

This study focuses on the 18 students who participated in the 2004 Mayen program. Students ranged in age from 19 to 23 years old. Thirteen students were enrolled at MSU, two at Central Michigan University (CMU), and three at Saint Louis University (SLU). More than half of the students were female. Most students had just completed their junior year of college, and the majority declared German as a primary or secondary major or minor. All but one student had previously traveled abroad. Of the students who had traveled abroad, all but one student had spent less than three months abroad. The majority of students had previously visited Europe; students had also visited Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Aruba, the Dominican Republic, Ukraine, Egypt, the Caribbean, and Antarctica. Half of students had participated in a high school student exchange program or study trip, or a college study abroad program. Two students participated in additional short-term summer study abroad programs in Europe,³⁰ which began immediately following the conclusion of the Mayen program.

Researcher Role

In order to help fund my research, I adopted the role of Program Assistant during the 2004 Mayen program, helping the faculty leader with administrative tasks before and during the program. For example, I made arrangements for the group flight, answered numerous student inquiries, and led a one-hour pre-departure orientation.³¹ While in Mayen, I lived with a local host family under the same circumstances as the program participants.

³⁰ One student spent four weeks in London, and the other four weeks in Brussels.

³¹ This orientation focused on non-academic issues such as how to get from the Frankfurt airport to Mayen, what to pack, host family gift ideas, and Eurail pass options.

Gathering ethnographic data requires the researcher to become actively involved in people's daily activities and experiences (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). I therefore attended all program meetings, orientations, classes, activities, and excursions as a participant observer. So that students were clear as to my role in and reason for being part of the program, I stated at the pre-departure orientation, and reiterated at Dr. Bauer's orientation at the end of April 2004 and in our initial meeting in Mayen, that I was conducting my dissertation research and was interested in their study abroad experience, both as a researcher and Program Assistant. I explained to students that I was available to assist them at any time. Since my goal was to explore students' perspectives, I spent my time with the students whenever possible (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003). During the initial group activities in Mayen I made a point to speak informally with each student in an effort to get to know them. I also made my presence visible by spending free-time in the locations that students frequent, such as popular cafés, and accepting any invitation to socialize during our free-time. I felt that I developed a rapport with students that enabled them to feel comfortable sharing their experiences and views with me (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003).

It was also critical to my chosen methodology that I find a way to make myself useful while in the field, in order to feel I belonged to the group and the program (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Being the Program Assistant provided me with a role within the formal context of the program; however, I was concerned that this formal role might distance me from the students during their free time (as a student I never wanted to spend my free time with my teachers!). Therefore, I asserted myself as the program's

photographer so I could gain additional access to students outside class in situations where I thought I might otherwise feel awkward approaching groups of students.

My presence in Mayen, role as Program Assistant, and on-going interaction with students, whether through informal conversation or focus group interviews, certainly created observer or “reactive effects” (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). However, Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) explain that these reactive effects:

...Should not be seen as ‘contaminating’ what is observed and learned. Rather, these effects are the very source of that learning and observation....Rather than detracting from what the fieldworker can learn, first-hand relations with those studied may provide clues to understanding the more subtle, implicit underlying assumptions that are often not readily accessible through observation or interview methods alone. Consequently, rather than viewing reactivity as a defect to be carefully controlled or eliminated in entirety, the ethnographer needs to become sensitive to and perceptive of how she is seen and treated by others. (p. 3)

It was imperative that I interact with the students in Mayen so I could learn through them about their experiences in Mayen (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995), and I strove to observe, participate, and interact in a natural, unobtrusive, and non-threatening way (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003, p. 35). It is also important to point out that while qualitative researchers collect data in the “natural setting,” this setting is in reality “a setting with a researcher present” (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003, p. 35). Therefore, rather than attempting to control any reactive effects generated from my observations and questions, it was more important that I maintained sensitivity to how students perceived and treated me (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995).

In thinking about my role during the program, how I would be perceived by students, and how they might interact with me, I grappled with methodological issues. Prior to my fieldwork, I debated whether students should write the cultural encounter letter narratives to me, the researcher, or to the faculty leader, their teacher. I decided that

students would in all probability feel more compelled to write these letter narratives if they were awarded course credit for their work. Additionally, I did not want students writing what they thought I, the researcher, wanted to hear. What is more, I wanted students to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings with me in interviews and informal conversation about how they interpreted the assignment, chose and wrote about cultural encounters, and if and how they perceived any links between completing the assignment and their culture learning process. Therefore, the letter assignment was written by me but incorporated into the course syllabus and assigned by Dr. Bauer. I was upfront with all students that the cultural encounter letter narratives would be part of my data corpus. Consequently, in interviews and informal conversation students candidly shared their positive and negative feelings about writing the letter narratives, which subsequently helped me understand how students chose what to write letters about and their criteria for determining what a cultural encounter was.

Research Study Participant Compensation

After the conclusion of the Mayen program, I compiled the photos that I took during the program, as well as photos emailed to me by participants, into a “Scrapbook CD” that featured all students in the various program contexts. I distributed the CDs at the Reunion Pizza Party that I held for students in September 2004. For those students who could not attend the pizza party, I either mailed the CD to them or gave it to them when we met for the post-program interview.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

The data I collected from several sources in three phases over six months afforded me many windows through which to view students’ lived experience and gain insight into

their perceptions of their daily cultural encounters. I made my data collection as deliberative as possible (Erikson, 1986). Prior to the onset of data collection, I carefully considered the various ways I could gather appropriate data; while in the field, after an initial period of comprehensive data collection, I made modifications as I developed and tested ideas (Erikson, 1986).

In this section, I first provide a brief overview of the three phases of data collection procedures so that the data sources can be viewed in the order in which they were collected. Then, I give a detailed description of each written and oral data source, noting, when necessary, the relevant methodological choices I made.

Phase 1: April 2004, Michigan State University

- Gathered institutional documents relevant to the Mayen program
- Explained research project and data collection procedures; administered consent forms and first questionnaire (at pre-departure meeting)
- Attended and composed fieldnotes for two pre-departure meetings
- Collected students' email introductions

Phase 2: May 21 – June 24, Mayen, Germany

- Reiterated research plan and data collection procedures to all students; administered consent form and first questionnaire to SLU students
- Collected from each student:
 - 10 Cultural Encounter Letters (also called “Dear Dr. Bauer” Letters³²)
 - German Journal

³² Cultural encounter letters were referred to as “Dear Dr. Bauer Letters” in the assignment given to students and generally during the Mayen program.

- Host Family Description
- Conducted mini-interviews and focus group interviews
- Administered second questionnaire (at the end of the program in June)

Phase 3: September 2004, Michigan State University

- Administered third questionnaire (emailed to students)
- Conducted individual, post-program interviews with CMU/MSU students
- Held Reunion Pizza Party and distributed “Scrapbook CD”

Written Data Sources

Institutional Program Materials

I began data collection by gathering institutional materials relating to the study abroad program, such as the student handbook, the general-orientation script used by the Office of Study Abroad, and pre-departure program-specific materials given to students. These materials provided me insight into institutional assumptions about the study abroad experience, culture, and learning that surround the Mayen program.

Student Questionnaires

At the beginning of the second pre-departure meeting in late April 2004, I administered the first of three student questionnaires.³³ The three out-of-state SLU students could not attend this orientation; therefore, I had them fill out the first questionnaire once in Mayen. This initial questionnaire asked students to detail their

³³ See Appendix B.

language learning and travel background, then answer questions regarding their definitions and perceptions of culture and opportunities for culture learning abroad. So that the research focus was not immediately apparent, I added distracter questions regarding student perceptions of language learning abroad.

Two additional questionnaires posed questions similar to the first questionnaire. The second questionnaire was given to all students in June during the last week of the program. Because class time was limited, I asked students to fill out the questionnaire outside of class. I knew it would be logistically impossible to meet with all students as a group a few months after the Mayen program so I therefore emailed the third questionnaire to all students in September. I asked students to complete the questionnaire and either email it, print it out and mail it, or give it to me in person at the Reunion Pizza Party or individual interviews.

The purpose of the three questionnaires was to get to know the students prior to the beginning of the program, as well as identify how students' definitions, perceptions, and expectations of culture and culture learning change over time in this formal context.

Email Introductions

All students were required to email a brief introduction of themselves, in German, to the faculty leader prior to departing for Europe. I collected these email introductions so that I could become familiar with students prior to the program. They also provided me with additional insight into students' backgrounds, their reasons for participating in the program, their expectations of the experience, and their German ability.

Cultural Encounter Letters

Once in Mayen, the point of entry into data collection and on-going analysis were students' written letter narratives³⁴ to Dr. Bauer, the faculty leader. At my request, students were given written instructions³⁵ at the first group meeting in Mayen to write two letters a week in English to Dr. Bauer. In each one to two page letter, students were asked to write about a recent cultural encounter of their choosing. The term "cultural encounter" was not defined in the assignment instructions. "Grades" were assigned on a credit/no credit basis, meaning students received credit for the assignment by writing at least one page and turning in the letter to Dr. Bauer on-time.

The letter narratives were generally due each Monday and Thursday. After Dr. Bauer collected the assignment from all students, I photocopied them using the copy machine in the Altes Rathaus, thanks to the generosity of the staff at the Mayen Tourist Information, and promptly returned them to Dr. Bauer. The 180 letter narratives I collected in Mayen provided me insight into how students observed, participated in, identified, defined, and evaluated cultural encounters.

German Journals

I collected and photocopied the weekly journals that all students were required to write in German. Writing an entry for every day of the program, students were to depict their life in Mayen outside class. These journals afforded me additional access to students' day-to-day experiences and cultural encounters in contexts I could not directly observe, such as their evening activities and weekend travels.

³⁴ Cultural encounter letters were referred to as "Dear Dr. Bauer Letters" in the assignment given to students and generally during the Mayen program.

³⁵ See Appendix E.

Host Family Description

Because I often heard students talking about their host families, I asked students during the penultimate week of the program to describe their host family and living situation for me. I handed out a list of eight questions³⁶ that I wanted them to address and emphasized that this activity was optional. Every student fulfilled my request, writing between one and four pages and even including drawings of their residences and floor-plans.

Oral Data Sources

Focus Group Interviews in Mayen

During my 2003 fieldwork in Mayen for my pilot study, in addition to participant observation, I held focus group interviews at a local café in the center of the Altstadt as a way to better understand students' experiences and perspectives. At that time, I had not yet thought about having students write cultural encounter letters. Talking with two to four students at a time while sitting outside around a café table, I was amazed at the fascinating stories, opinions, impressions, interpretations, and hypotheses about culture that students readily shared with me. To my surprise, all students signed up for an interview and spoke easily and openly. Many even commented that they really enjoyed talking with me about their experiences.

Despite the positive aspects of conducting hour-long focus group interviews with all program participants, I decided against including such interviews in my 2004 data collection. I did not want to influence students' choosing and writing of their cultural encounter letters by talking about them in interviews, and due to the dense program

³⁶ See Appendix G.

schedule, I realized it would be impossible to schedule such interviews on a weekly basis. Additionally, each hour-long interview I conducted during my pilot study required multiple hours of transcription (Patton, 2001). Because I spent my evenings typing up fieldnotes and reading and coding students' letter narratives and journals, in order to prepare for the next day's observations, when I was not attending an evening program-sponsored activity or excursion, I concluded that I would not have sufficient time to transcribe the enormous amount of data derived from focus group interviews. Moreover, I decided that my other sources would yield more than enough data for this study.

During the third week of my 2004 fieldwork, however, I determined that I needed information in addition to what I was learning from daily informal conversations with students regarding their decision-making process in choosing a cultural encounter to write about in their letter narratives. I felt there was more to students' perspectives than that I was able to glean through participant observation; interviews are a way to gain access to inner perspectives we cannot observe (Patton, 2001). Therefore, I asked students to volunteer for mini-interviews in pairs on one afternoon when there was a gap between the end of class and a late-afternoon fieldtrip. Nearly all students volunteered for an interview. At a café on the Marktplatz, I spent about five to ten minutes simply asking each pair of students to describe how they interpreted the letter narrative assignment, and how they chose cultural encounters to write about. So as to minimize the influence they might have on students' cultural encounters, I simply asked the questions and let students speak, posing additional questions only when I needed clarification. I took notes during our conversation, as I did not tape record it, and wrote up students' responses in my fieldnotes that evening.

Students' comments during the mini-interviews surprised me, so I then decided to squeeze in one longer, more in-depth interview during the last week of the program, in order to obtain more elaborate explanations about their cultural encounter letters. I also detected some eagerness on the students' part to again share their thoughts and experiences with me.³⁷ I noticed a few different blocks of time when I could fit in interviews so I distributed a sign-up sheet to students asking them to sign up in pairs or small groups for a voluntary interview. Nearly all students volunteered. I met most of the groups in local cafés; one group wanted to meet in an empty program classroom. On average, the audio-taped semi-structured interviews lasted about 30-45 minutes. I began each interview with informal conversation (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003), and then moved into asking questions from my interview guide³⁸ (Patton, 2001) when it seemed appropriate, adding spontaneous follow-up questions when necessary. Students readily answered all of my questions and eagerly shared examples, stories, opinions, and experiences.

Individual Post-program Interviews

During one week in late-September 2004, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 of the 18 program participants. One MSU student was still abroad at the time of the interview, and because I could not travel to SLU I was unable to interview the three students who attended that university. I requested individual interviews with the MSU and CMU students when I emailed my third questionnaire. In order to make the interviews as convenient as possible for the busy students, I set aside an entire week for the interviews and asked students to determine the date, time, and location of our

³⁷ Students told me, for example, that they enjoyed talking with me or that they would be willing to answer more questions at a later time.

³⁸ See Appendix F.

interview. Most interviews took place in the food court café at MSU's International Center; however, some were held at other local cafés on and off campus. About 30 minutes of the interview were devoted to students answering the questions³⁹ I had for them; the rest of the time I chatted with students about their post-program travel, desires and plans to go abroad, and other future plans. I audio taped each interview, after gaining student consent, so that I could obtain accurate quotes and be more attentive and responsive during the interview than would have been possible, had I made extensive handwritten notes.

Initially, I had planned to give each student one or two of their letter narratives to re-read and critique. However, after implementing this strategy with three different students and finding that students had very little to say about their letter narratives, I began giving students all 10 of their letters to look through. This proved more effective as students began talking, and even addressing the questions in my interview guide, prior to me asking.

Fieldwork: Participant Observation

Fieldwork is a crucial component of interpretive qualitative research methodology, as it is the way in which the researcher can observe, record, and begin to interpret action and meanings in context. It is also "labor intensive research" (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003, p. 51). In all contexts of the Mayen program I was a participant observer, in that I attended meetings, classes, activities, and excursions; however, I did not participate as a peer of the students, but rather in the role of Program Assistant and researcher. The extent of my participation varied depending on the setting (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003). For example, while in class I remained quietly in the background; however, during activities

³⁹ See Appendix H.

and fieldtrips I chatted with students and tried to experience the activity as students did. Initially, I recorded fieldnotes “opportunisticly” (Sanjek, 1990), covering and detailing as much as possible; however, over time I became increasingly selective and focused on contexts and occurrences within contexts that addressed the themes and ideas I generated from the data.

Realizing that I brought my own “frames of interpretation” (Erikson, 1986, p. 140), based on my personal, professional, educational, and cultural experience, I knew it would be impossible for me to conduct fieldwork in a completely objective manner. Therefore, during the course of this study I probed my thoughts, opinions, ideas, and biases in a reflective “field diary” (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003) separate from my fieldnotes. As Erickson (1986) stated, “the task of fieldwork is to become more and more reflectively aware of the frames of interpretation of those we observe, and of our own culturally learned frames of interpretation we brought with us to the setting” (p. 140). This activity helped me, for example, realize how my past study abroad experiences influenced my negative view of short-term study abroad, as I discussed in chapter 1.

Following is a brief account of the various contexts in which I was a participant observer.

Pre-departure Orientation Meetings

In fieldnotes from these meetings I gave a brief physical description of each student, and detailed the topics addressed, and the comments and questions that arose.

German Class at the Altes Rathaus

Class was held Monday through Thursday in two rooms on the second floor of the Altes Rathaus. On the white walls hung framed pictures and drawings, from the tall ceiling hung heavy metal chandeliers, and the multiple tall windows let in light, fresh air, and the sounds of the town square below. In the center of the room stood large wooden tables that were pushed together into one large table. Students sat around three sides of the table while the instructor sat at the head of the table. Every day when I arrived in the classroom I dragged a chair a few feet away from the table into a corner.

I was always able to hear students talk and was usually able to see their faces. So that I could make more complete notes during class, I typed them into a small Pocket PC using a foldable keyboard. On the first day of class, I explained my note-taking plan to both instructors and assured them that if my typing was disruptive I would switch to using pen and paper. During class conversations the sound of students' voices drowned out the sound of keyboard; when it was quiet in the classroom I either typed slowly enough so that I made no sound or took notes with a pen and paper. During the times when students left the classroom, such as when they completed activities in a local internet café, I took notes using a pen and paper. Students made only a couple direct comments to me about my presence in the classroom or my note-taking methods; such comments stemmed from their interest in my Pocket PC. Every night when I returned to my lodging, I revised the notes I took during class and wrote down any impressions or comments I had about the day in a separate journal. Using a Compact Flash card, I backed up my fieldnotes on a daily basis.

My fieldnotes from the classes that Drs. Bauer and Schmidt taught were often a transcription of the class conversation. Before class began, I noted the seating arrangement of students, the weather, changes to the classroom, and recorded any interactions with students I had on my way to class. Then, when class began, I recorded what was said by students and instructor. I also copied down anything written or drawn on the chalkboard, collected handouts, noted students' facial expressions and body language, side-conversations among students, and any questions I developed. When students engaged in partner or group work, I focused on the students nearest me, since I could see and hear these students the best. While I was initially very comprehensive with my note-taking in class, as the program went on, I began to focus my attention on, for example, students' culture-specific questions, students' presentations about weekend travel, and discussions about cultural topics, and less on the times when grammar topics were covered.

Although the classes were conducted primarily in German, I decided to take notes on the class in English. Had I been observing a room full of native German speakers I could have more easily taken notes in German. Because the students were learning and practicing a foreign language, however, they made numerous language errors and I quickly found that I could not accurately record what students were saying, correctly or incorrectly. I therefore wrote all of my notes in English. As I wrote, I noted when students and instructors spoke in German or occasionally switched to English, and I wrote down the German words and phrases I was confident I understood correctly. The positive aspect of taking notes in English was that I could record more of what students were discussing, almost as a transcript. The negative aspect, however, was that I was

unable to record many quotes, since I only wrote something as a quote when I am absolutely sure that I can record what they said accurately.

Program-sponsored Activities and Fieldtrips

I had told students numerous times that they would almost always see me with a pen in one hand and a notebook in the other. Students were required by the faculty leader to carry a small notebook in which they recorded unfamiliar words and noted their questions. Many students also carried personal journals with them. Therefore, in most situations I felt comfortable taking handwritten notes. During tours, for example, I recorded notes in a regular notebook. On busses, trains, and during times when we were all hanging around waiting, I wrote notes in a notebook that looked like a personal journal. During activities where I felt it was inappropriate to make notes, such as during the Rotary Dinner, I made mental notes and wrote them down on tiny index cards when I had a moment alone, went to the restroom, or as soon as I left the activity (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003). Regardless of how I recorded the notes, I used them to construct fieldnotes from the day as soon as I got back to my lodging each night.

I had initially thought I would be able to quickly discern students' cultural encounter criteria, and then pay specific attention to the instances in which students addressed cultural encounters; however, once in Mayen I realized that I could not identify clear cultural encounter criteria. Therefore, I focused my note-taking on students' cultural questions, generalizations, or interpretations, and any mention of their host family, Germany, their cultural encounter letters or any instance they called a cultural encounter, weekend travel, or other experiences. I also recorded any occasion in which a student

specifically approached me to talk about an observation or experience they had, or anything that seemed important to students.

Free-time Spent with Students

Periodically I spent free-time with the students. Because I did not want to make them feel uncomfortable talking with me I did not take notes during these interactions (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003). Instead, I made mental notes about what I wanted to include in my fieldnotes. When I had a moment alone or after I had parted with the students, I jotted down key words and phrases on the tiny index cards I kept in my pocket, wallet, purse, and backpack. My notes focused on the same topics as explained in the previous section.

Examining the Data

One way to describe data analysis and interpretation is as the ongoing process of creating and solving a puzzle (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). In the beginning, the researcher creates numerous potential puzzle pieces that will eventually fit together to create a unified picture. As data analysis and interpretation progress, the researcher must modify, create new, and dispose of old puzzle pieces as she begins to see how the entire puzzle can fit together. As Bogdin & Biklin (2003) point out, “data are both the evidence and the clues” (p. 109).

With this study, data analysis and interpretation began when I collected program-related documents, and continued through writing up my findings. Before, during, and after fieldwork in Mayen, I read through each data source multiple times, while jotting down notes and questions to investigate. Qualitative research is largely inductive, meaning that theory is generated from the data; however, as Erickson points out,

...in fieldwork, induction and deduction are in constant dialogue. As a result, the researcher pursues deliberate lines of inquiry while in the field, even though the specific terms of inquiry may change in response to the distinctive character of the events in the field setting. The specific terms of inquiry may also be reconstructed in response to changes in the fieldworker's perceptions and understandings of events and their organization during the time spent in the field. (p. 121)

While in the field, I specifically investigated students' definitions and perceptions of and experiences with their self-identified cultural encounters. Initial analysis at that time allowed me to glean information and develop analytic questions that pointed out the direction, modification, or addition of subsequent data sources (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003). For example, because I could not discern students' cultural encounter criteria just from reading their letters, I conducted brief focus group interviews, in order to more directly elicit students' views. From comments made in these interviews, such as students' perceived lack of cultural encounters, I organized an additional interview with pairs of students towards the end of the program. At that point, my inquiry also became focused on trying to understand the factors related to students' claim of a decrease in cultural encounters. Additionally, after hearing students' comments about their host family, such as the desire to spend more time with them, I decided to ask students to tell me more about their host family situation in written form by answering questions I distributed. During that initial period of data analysis, when I was reading students' cultural encounter letters, German journals, and my fieldnotes, I asked myself many questions, including the following: What seem to be students' concerns? What are students (not) doing? What stands out to me? What seems to be missing? What do I want to know more about? Where else in the data have I noted this question, situation, or concern? During

this time, I made a note of potential links between data sources, and about any and all ideas and questions I developed.

When I returned to the U.S., I cleaned up my fieldnotes, typed students' 180 hand-written cultural encounter letters into the computer, and transcribed the on-site focus group interviews and the individual interviews that I held a few months after the Mayen program ended. I also made two photocopies of all data sources (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003) and stored these copies in 3-ring binders. In two binders I placed program-related documents, fieldnotes, and interview transcripts in chronological order. In three additional binders I stored student surveys, email introductions, journals, and 10 cultural encounters, organized alphabetically by student. I kept my reflective journal in a separate folder. I feel I should point out that I did not use a computer data analysis program for several reasons. First, a significant portion of the data was in hand-written form. Second, the data sources were in both German and English. Third, the amount of data generated was not large enough to warrant such a program. Finally, analyzing the data "by hand" provided me with a closer and more holistic view of the content (Erickson, 1986).

I then began a period of more focused and detailed analysis and interpretation by engaging in close reading and analytic coding. I approached the data "in an open-ended way, seeking to identify issues and ideas by a careful sifting through and piecing together of the fieldnotes" (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) and other data sources. In doing so, I engaged in the lengthy process of reading the entire data corpus multiple times. Since this was my first opportunity to work with and write directly on a hard copy of the data corpus, the first few readings consisted of comprehensive open coding, in which I sought to identify and describe what was happening in the data so that I could categorize units of

data. I underlined words and phrases that seemed to support or disconfirm ideas generated in my initial analysis during fieldwork, and I made notes in the margins that characterized topics, actions, patterns, and processes in the data (Bogdin & Biklin, 2003; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). In my fieldnotes, for example, I marked, among other things, the instances in which students asked culture-specific questions, talked about their host families, or made a remark about German or U.S. American culture. When reading the cultural encounter letters, I noted, for example, the program context (e.g. free-time, weekend travel, host family, etc.), what seemed to be the focus of the cultural encounter, students' questions, cultural generalizations, and cultural comparisons. In my line-by-line reading of the data, I also recorded ideas about "what is going on in a piece of data" (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 146) and questions I developed on small sticky notes, which I placed in a notebook. As I continued open coding, I read through these sticky notes and organized them into broader ideas regarding noticed patterns, questions, and new potential topics to explore.

When open coding generated no additional new ideas or avenues to explore, I re-organized a copy of the data set based on the list of analytic codes and core themes I had developed. In doing so, I pared down the large amount of data into smaller, more focused sections, so that I could engage in focused coding, identify patterns, develop arguments, and envision how to tell the story of my data (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). In one example, I grouped all instances in which cultural topics were addressed in students' German class. In another, I sorted the coded data into a unit focusing on students' weekend travel experiences. I also sorted and grouped the cultural encounter letters multiple times. For example, after reading each student's letters in consecutive order, I

read all letters that stemmed from a particular program context, such as weekend travel, or all letters that focused on an interaction a student had. As I read through each small set of data, I developed sub-codes, in order to further categorize the data and look for links between the paired-down units of data.

I also wrote initial and integrative memos, in which I further elaborated on themes and key links between data sources (Erikson, 1986). For example, when I noticed that many of my initial memos included remarks about the Mayen program creating or constraining opportunities for students to interact with Germans, I gathered every instance of this in the data, noting supporting and disconfirming pieces of data, and wrote in more detail about what seemed to be occurring. As I continued piecing together data into topics and topics into larger themes, I developed the thematic narrative that follows in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

When students received the cultural encounter letter assignment they were mostly silent. It was our first evening together in Mayen. The students, Dr. Bauer,⁴⁰ and I met for a couple of hours at what would become a popular café in which to take refuge from the often rainy and chilly weather. After introductions were made, drink orders were taken, and the first few days' schedule was covered, Dr. Bauer distributed the half-sheet of paper on which the cultural encounter letter assignment was written.⁴¹ Dr. Bauer verbally reinforced that students were to decide for themselves what a cultural encounter was and that there were no restrictions on letter topics. He also reminded students that they were required to turn in the letters to him on time in order to receive credit for the assignment. When Dr. Bauer asked if there were any questions, only one student raised her hand to ask if they could write the letters in German (the answer was no). I was surprised that no additional questions were posed at the meeting; based on my teaching experience I had envisioned students immediately requesting detailed directions, if not a specific definition of the term cultural encounter.⁴²

During the five weeks that students lived in Mayen I collected, photocopied, read, and re-read students' cultural encounter letters as soon as they submitted them to Dr. Bauer. Students' letters appeared to be largely superficial accounts of myriad observations, punctuated by the occasional interaction or experience that left the writer in a negative emotional state. While in Mayen, in order to better understand how students chose topics for their cultural encounter letters, and thus how they defined and perceived cultural encounters, I arranged small group interviews. As students explained some of their considerations in choosing letter topics, they also noted that it became increasingly difficult to find cultural encounters to write about. I was initially quite puzzled by their declared dearth of cultural encounters, as all students continued to submit cultural encounter letters twice a week. If students were lacking cultural encounters, what were they writing their letters about?

⁴⁰ All names have been changed to provide anonymity.

⁴¹ The cultural encounter letter assignment is explained in detail in chapter 3. The handout distributed to students is in the Appendix E.

⁴² Mayen fieldnotes.

In this chapter, I will show how students defined, perceived, and experienced self-identified cultural encounters within the complex web of opportunity and limitations of their study abroad program. As I will explain later, in writing the first few cultural encounter letters during the initial week of the program, students created implicit criteria that soon became a heuristic against which they assessed potential cultural encounter letter topics for the remainder of the program. The cultural criteria appeared to stem from the seemingly unending supply of objective cultural differences that were initially very evident, and were mirrored by students' pre-program ideas of culture and culture learning. Soon, however, when these surprising objective cultural differences became routine, students began perceiving a lack of cultural encounters to write about. Students' cultural encounter criteria seemed to be reinforced by a combination of factors, including their perceptions of a specific class activity, what they perceived their instructor's expectations to be, and the transparent role of language learning versus the implicit role of culture learning. Students struggled with their self-imposed cultural encounter criteria during the program, as there were topics that students wanted to write letters about but, for various reasons, did not. In some instances, however, students did revise the cultural encounter criteria by writing about an experience that was personally meaningful, yet did not fit their criteria. Part of students' struggle seemed to stem from the fact that what they perceived as appropriate for cultural encounter letters no longer encompassed that which intrigued or emotionally affected them.

In this chapter, I also discuss two program contexts in relation to the cultural encounter letters, the host family and weekend travel, and I show that some cultural encounter letters illustrate students' exploration of their cultural identity, as well as

questioning of their cultural interpretations. I conclude the chapter by presenting students' post-program ideas about culture and culture learning, students' comments and suggestions regarding the cultural encounter letter activity, and how they view the Mayen program as an experiment.

Students' Cultural Encounter Criteria: Creation, Constriction, and Coping

Creating Their Cultural Encounter Criteria

Dear Dr. Bauer,⁴³

I'd like to tell you about a cultural experience I had this week. I had my first visit to the Frankfurt airport a few days ago. I thought it was interesting some of the differences that I saw between the Frankfurt airport and American airports. As I walked out of my gate, I noticed a cloud of cigarette smoke. Cigarettes have been banned from American airports for along time. As I looked around there were people with dogs waiting for their loved ones. I was quite surprised to see dogs in an airport. If the dogs were to urinate or poo on the floor it would make it unpleasant for everyone. Rules in Europe seem to be much more relaxed than rules in public places in America. Compared to America there are many more airlines. Frankfurt is a centralized location. Being in the center of Europe the Frankfurt airport can offer flights anywhere in Europe, but also several places in the middle east and Asia. There also flights to north and south America as well. So, from Frankfurt one can travel almost anywhere in the world. Another difference I noticed were bicycles. People were riding bikes around the airport. I don't know whether they were employees or just passengers trying to relieve themselves from stressful flights, but I saw quite a few people riding bikes. I enjoyed seeing the differences. I think I am in for an interesting trip. It has been alot of fun just in the airport. I can't wait to see Mayen. (- Austin)

During the giddy first days of the Mayen program, everything was new, different, unexpected, and often quite surprising for students, especially those who, like Austin, had never before visited Germany. Their senses immediately bombarded by the unfamiliar, many students identified cultural encounters as soon as they took their first steps off the plane. As Austin's letter indicates, his first cultural encounter comprised noticing

⁴³ Cultural encounter letters are presented exactly as students wrote them. Any grammatical, spelling or other errors are those of the students. These letters were originally handwritten by students while in Mayen, and later typed up by me. I carefully checked each letter to ensure that any mistakes were not a result of my mistyping.

worldwide flight destinations, smelling cigarette smoke, seeing dogs indoors, and watching employees riding bicycles through the Frankfurt airport.

Most of the first two cultural encounter letters that students wrote during the inaugural week of the program were similar to Austin's letter. Students wrote primarily about myriad surprising observations of visible or tangible (Cushner, 2004) differences in cultural products and practices between the U.S. and Germany. Following are several examples:

- Eric wrote about his “first taste of Germany” as he described sampling German ice cream, beer, and carbonated mineral water.
- Anna detailed accidentally over-sleeping because she did not realize the window shades, which were “very unlike what we are used to in America,” completely block out sunlight when closed.
- Jesse explained a surprising miscommunication he observed in a restaurant due to the numbers “1” and “7” being written differently in Germany and the U.S.
- Rachel reported eating what she perceived to be “raw bacon” for breakfast one morning.
- Nathan, Andrew, and Olivia pointed out how Germans and Americans differ when it comes to allowing dogs into what they deemed “human places.”
- Rae explained that she could not understand why the doors to her host family's kitchen, dining, and living rooms were closed, since these were “community spaces.”

In this early introduction to Germany, students were observing and becoming conscious of some characteristics of their host culture. In essence, students were acting as ethnographers, as they were collecting cultural data (Laubscher, 1994), a practice people living abroad are encouraged to cultivate (e.g. Cushner, 2004; Hess, 1997; Laubscher, 1994).

Since students were not provided with a definition of the term cultural encounter, they had to create one for themselves, in order to decide what to write their letters about. While students never explicitly spelled out their cultural encounter criteria as such, commonality among the first two cultural encounter letters was evident. These letters primarily comprised students' observations of novel, recent, surprising, visible or tangible differences. Students seemed to equate cultural encounters with observations of objective cultural differences in products and practices because, in part, they defined students' initial experience in Germany. It seemed that because students easily found so many objective cultural differences, they perceived a wealth of cultural encounters.

The first couple of weeks I had lots of ideas. They were rushing through me. I probably had four or five decent topics that I could write about per week... The first several were more heartfelt, more, wow, I actually noticed this. This was my first time to Europe and I really experienced new cultural differences on a daily basis, on an hourly basis really.

As Eric noted, because he discovered what he deemed to be new cultural differences "on an hourly basis" he possessed a multitude of cultural encounters that he could write about. This was also the case for other students.

Having just arrived in Germany, some for the very first time, students engaged with the target culture on a tourist level and were therefore most aware of the objective elements of culture that can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, and tasted (Cushner, 2004).

As newcomers to Mayen, students had limited opportunities for more than surface interaction with locals and most students were simply focused on taking everything in as they observed their surroundings while walking to class, shopping, and eating in restaurants. This surface level of engagement is to be expected, and thus students' cultural encounter criteria are not surprising. However, as the following section shows, students' cultural encounter criteria quickly became constraining.

Being Constrained by Their Cultural Encounter Criteria

Dear Dr. Bauer,

I'd like to tell you about a cultural encounter (experience) I had this week. When we arrived in the airport I had to take the plastic bag off my backpack from checked luggage. I looked around for a trash can, expecting something like the trash can we have in America..., but I didn't see anything. Then, finally I saw what looked like a trash can. I went over to it and saw that it had four compartments for trash. There were a lot of people around and of course I thought they were all staring at me (that crazy American). I saw that one compartment already had a plastic bag like mine in there, so I quickly put my bag in that one too and went over to Anna. I told her about the trash can.

She laughed and explained about how the Germans have separate compartments for different types of trash. It's all a part of the recycling thing. So later in an area of the airport where there were less people around and examined the trash can again. It had a paper, plastic, mühl and another one that I think was "decomposables." I remember learning about that sort of at one point at MUS, but I guess I forgot.

Then, yesterday Kirsten (our host mom) showed us the different trash compartments, they are: paper, plastic, compost, and everything else. There are even special bags that everything goes in and also special trashcans outside (big ones) with special compartments.

It's a very complicated system compared to what I'm used to, but it makes a lot of sense for Germany (which has less land area than the U.S. and therefore less room for landfills). It's also way better for the environment too, which is something I care about. And that was my cultural experience.

In Erin's cultural encounter letter she describes the differences between methods of trash disposal in the U.S. and Germany. Erin quickly noticed this difference as soon as she arrived in Germany because she needed to throw away a plastic bag. For Erin, even

though she had previously learned about this German practice in classes in the U.S., finding a four-compartment trash can was initially surprising and quite different from that to which she was accustomed.

I present Erin's cultural encounter letter because it is in line with the implicit criteria that students created at the beginning of the program, as Erin's observation centered on a surprising objective cultural difference. Later, in a post-program interview, Erin explained why she wrote her first letter about trash disposal in Germany.

I was totally freaking out about the, like, trash compartments...the separation of trash. When I first got here I was like, oh my gosh, we learned about this in high school and it's actually here. This is so cool. It's so different. At the beginning, I thought this was something really different.

Later, however, after Erin had learned from an American friend and their German host mother about the differences between the trash compartments, she grew used to them. Therefore, she concluded that "at the end [of the program] it was normal and I wouldn't have written about [this topic]." Thus, Erin wrote about trash disposal in Germany because it was a surprising difference; however, when it was no longer surprising, she no longer considered it a cultural encounter.⁴⁴

Like Erin, the other students quickly became familiar with their surroundings as the program progressed. At the same time, students became less enthusiastic about writing their cultural encounter letters, as they began to lament a dearth of cultural encounters to write about.

⁴⁴ Erin's letter also illustrates her endeavor to understand the reasons for the cultural difference she observed. Erin certainly included more than a mere recording of an observation. For example, Erin gleans information by talking with her U.S. American friend and later with their German host mother. Erin also briefly considers how and why Germany's method of trash disposal and recycling "makes sense for Germany." However, this is not the central point being addressed in this section. Later in this chapter, I will present and discuss the ways students' dug beneath the cultural surface.

I think it got a lot harder at the end, to be, like, oh my gosh, there's this huge cultural encounter! Things just didn't seem as weird. Like, at the beginning, so many things just seemed weird so I was like, gosh, I should write about this. But towards the end, I don't know, I guess I just kept thinking, well, it's not really a cultural encounter.⁴⁵

Erin's sentiments echoed other students' comments. As students became familiar with their immediate surroundings, host families, and program schedule, they perceived having increasingly fewer cultural encounters. The things that had initially been so "weird" became like sorting trash into four bins for Erin: normal. "[It became] hard to say, OK, this is a real big culture shock for me because you're used to it...I think of things as normal now, you know? I don't think, 'that's really weird,'"⁴⁶ explained Rachel.

Instead of choosing from a host of possible topics, as was the case initially, students struggled to identify potential cultural encounters and decide what to write about. Ryan explained that he "would sit down and think, alright, how much can I make up about a topic to fill a page...what can I write a page about?"⁴⁷ Eric explained that he started looking for *anything* that was different so he would have something to write about.

The past couple of weeks I've been kinda searching it seems. I don't know that I've let any decent idea pass. The first couple of weeks of the program I was noticing everything and saying, Hey! This is different! And this is different! And now it's like, hey, this is different – I'll write about that!⁴⁸

Like Eric, many students wrote about any cultural difference they happened to notice, just so they could complete a cultural encounter letter. Soon, however, the criteria became limiting, as students identified fewer and fewer instances that fit their cultural

⁴⁵ Post-program individual interview.

⁴⁶ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁴⁷ Post-program individual interview.

⁴⁸ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

encounter criteria. Thus, they perceived a severe decline in the number and frequency of cultural encounters.

Coping with Their Cultural Encounter Criteria

Students struggled with the constraints of their implicit cultural encounter criteria throughout the program, since they were required to complete 10 letters during their five weeks in Mayen. In most instances, it appears that students opted to write about cultural encounters that fit the criteria, albeit at the expense of their interest in the topic. Sometimes, however, students seemed to revise their implicit criteria to include observations, experiences, and interactions that were meaningful to them. Following is a discussion of these ways that students coped with their constraining cultural encounter criteria.

When students no longer possessed a long list of potential cultural encounter letter topics, some altered the way they chose topics to write about. Eric, for example, noted that while motivated to write cultural encounter letters, he chose to write about some topics he considered “uninspired.” On one occasion he wrote a letter focusing on observations he made about cars in the U.S. and Europe. In a post-program interview Eric explained that he chose that topic simply because he needed to complete a letter. “The one about the cars, as far as their style, I don’t know that that one was very inspired, other than, I need to have this done,” he said. Natalie, who had previously visited Germany, noted that many of the cultural encounters she wrote about were not novel experiences. “A lot of my cultural experiences I’d already encountered because I’d been there before... The one thing I did encounter was going to the doctor. That was different,”⁴⁹ she said. Similarly, Anna explained that instead of writing about recently discovered cultural

⁴⁹ Post-program individual interview.

differences, she “revert[ed] back to old things that annoyed me overall...instead of a specific thing that happened that week.”⁵⁰

Other students identified cultural encounters that were in line with their criteria during their weekend travels, as they could again easily identify objective cultural differences. For example, during a weekend trip to Italy, Gwen wrote a cultural encounter letter about her observation of the ways Italians treated tourists from several different countries. In a post-program interview Gwen explained why she wrote about that observation.

I guess we were in Germany for two or three weeks and so at that point I had adjusted to Germany. And so when I got to Italy, it was like the first weekend in Germany. You observe as carefully as you did when you were right first in Germany...So the subject was a no-brainer. Like the dynamics of the people we saw were immediate.

Weekend travel often provided a fresh context within which students could identify self-imposed criteria-appropriate cultural encounters.

When it became challenging to identify cultural encounters, students often chose topics that clearly fit the restrictive criteria, even though the topics did not always mirror their current interest or engagement in their cultural surroundings. Because the program schedule kept students busy, and the assignment was designed to simply award students credit for submitting the cultural encounter letters on time, it appeared that students often chose the path of least resistance so that they could spend time working on graded homework, traveling or socializing. “I tried not to wait until the last minute but sometimes there were times when nothing exciting happened, especially towards the end [so] I’ve just gotta choose *something* cultural,”⁵¹ explained Erin. Thus the cultural

⁵⁰ Post-program individual interview.

⁵¹ Post-program individual interview.

encounter letters do not always reflect what students considered cultural encounters.

Anna explained her predicament in identifying letter topics.

Sometimes when we'd just have class and no field trips and I'd be like, I need to write about something! I'd be looking at every little thing everyday to see if I could get something out of it. I wrote about things that weren't really a cultural experience for me, but I had to write something. Like, I wrote how Europeans like soccer [and] the one at the Tent where there were no shower curtains...that was strange but I wouldn't say that was really a cultural experience.⁵²

It seemed that some students sensed there was more to discover and ponder beyond simply noticing a difference. Erin, for example, explained that she wanted to write about "a real cultural experience, like something that really made me think, as opposed to something that was, like, well, I guess I'll write about this."⁵³ Even though students wanted to write about other topics, they seemed tethered to the criteria created in the writing of the first few cultural encounter letters.

There were, however, a few instances in which students, in effect, revised their cultural encounter criteria, as some cultural encounter letters did not fit the criteria mold. Such letters were typically personal explorations of an interaction or experience that appeared to affect the student on a deeper level. Illustrating one such instance is the following cultural encounter letter excerpt, in which Olivia describes a conversation she had with a German soldier in a Mayen bar.

We've talked a lot about stereotypes that Germans have for Americans and also those that Americans have for Germans. While in die Kneipe "Central" last Thursday night I met a few German soldiers and we were talking about what they do, why they joined, etc. I was explaining about how I had wanted to join the Marine Corps Reserve but after September 11, things became so unsure that I decided against it. He was telling game about Germans in Afghanistan which was interesting because I didn't know there were Germans serving there. Then he started telling me about how German people view American soldiers (or at least prior to Iraq), as great people for what they had done during and following the

⁵² Post-program individual interview.

⁵³ Post-program individual interview.

Second World War. He also told me that German people still associate German soldiers with Nazis. I found this very interesting because I had basically assumed that predecided notions and stereotypes had dissolved since the war. Granted I have a great-uncle who while telling war stories referred to German as “Krauts” but other than old people, I figured this was no longer. I haven’t come across any Americans who still bear hard feelings toward Japanese people as was the case historically. I think that it’s possible for these feelings to remain for the Germans because the war was so huge and shameful for those in Germany and were against it. It severely tarnished the notion of Germany and perhaps the damage was so much more devastating that the past will harm the Germans for a much longer time that I thought it may.

Olivia had visited Germany several times prior to participating in the Mayen program, and consequently found it difficult from the beginning to write cultural encounter letters that fit the implicit criteria. She commented that it was “kinda difficult for me to find things to write about because I had been to Europe...so I’d seen a lot of things before.”⁵⁴ Olivia explained that while she found her conversation with the German soldier intriguing to her for personal reasons, she did not initially consider this conversation a cultural encounter.

[I] had to look a little deeper and things I wouldn’t have construed as cultural experiences, the more I thought about them, I’m like, OK, this is [a cultural encounter]. The one where I was talking to the guy, the soldier, in the bar -- I wasn’t going to use that one at first but then someone was, like, talk about that! [I thought] that’s a good point...It was stuff like that that wasn’t quite so obvious...I had to dig a little deeper⁵⁵.

For Olivia, choosing cultural encounters to write letters about became “a process of stuff adding up over the whole trip and then finally stopping to think about it and interpret it. Stuff you wouldn’t notice right away.”⁵⁶ Olivia explained that she did not want to waste her time on topics that were not “really new” to her. Therefore, she developed a new concept, at least for that cultural encounter letter, of what constituted a cultural encounter.

⁵⁴ Post-program individual interview.

⁵⁵ Post-program individual interview.

⁵⁶ Post-program individual interview.

As I investigated the cultural encounter criteria that students created, how these criteria constrained their identification of cultural encounters, and the ways in which students coped with the criteria, two questions arose. First, since students struggled with their cultural encounter criteria throughout the program, were there additional factors that informed or even reinforced their criteria? Second, in what ways did the environment in which students identified and wrote cultural encounter letters, namely the Mayen program, inform students' definitions, experiences, and perceptions? In the following two sections, I explore these questions as I present and discuss students' German class, their perceptions of their instructor's expectations, and their perceptions of language and culture learning, as well as the host family and weekend travel contexts.

Factors that Informed and Reinforced Students' Cultural Encounter Criteria

Beyond simply being at the tourist level of engagement with a new culture during their initial days in Mayen, students' pre-study abroad ideas of culture and culture learning also seemed to inform their quickly developed implicit cultural encounter criteria. What is more, students' perceptions of a German class activity and their professor's expectations, as well as the transparency of language learning in contrast to culture learning, seemed to reinforce students' initial cultural encounter criteria. These factors that informed and reinforced students' initial criteria seemed to complicate and steer the way students identified and wrote about their self-identified cultural encounters.

Students' Ideas of Culture and Culture Learning

The ideas about culture and culture learning that students held prior to the Mayen program seemed to inform their initial cultural encounter criteria. According to pre-departure surveys, students' definitions of culture focused heavily on the objective

elements of “the ways that people live” and differentiate one group of people from another. Students listed elements such as food, clothing, art, architecture, family and social structure, customs, language, literature, rituals, routines, and behavior. While some students made vague references on their surveys to the subjective level of culture when they included “a set of values” or “beliefs” in their definitions, students’ ideas remained primarily centered on the products and practices of a group of people.

Students defined culture learning primarily as ways of accessing or exposing themselves to the host culture. On pre-departure questionnaires, students cited, for example, seeking out and talking with native speakers in German, visiting “as many places around Germany as possible,” and “reading, watching TV, shopping, eating out,” as specific ways students predicted they would maximize culture learning during the Mayen program. Others took a more general approach, stating that they would “be open to all activities,” “expos[e] myself to local customs,” or “just try to be engulfed.” These ideas point to the perception that culture learning involves the act of putting oneself in the midst of a new culture, and then simply letting culture come to them. As one student noted on their questionnaire, “I am going to have an open mind about everything to absorb as much as possible while I am there.” Interestingly, only two students mentioned a more active and inquisitive process of culture learning. One student reported the goal to “try to meet students/people my age to compare their views with mine,” while another planned to “learn and ask about important events and ideals by the German people I’m in contact with.”

The products and practices of objective culture are most readily available and apparent to tourists because they are visible, tangible, and easily observed (Cushner,

2004). The problem, however, is that while these elements seem to be prevalent and important, due to their high visibility and the relative ease with which a traveler can identify and talk about them, they are not “the aspects of culture that are the most critical and meaningful; nor are they the ones that lead to the problems people generally encounter in communication or interpersonal or group conflict” (Cushner, 2004, p. 40). In the course of the program, students did knowingly and unknowingly confront deeper subjective elements of culture, namely values, beliefs, and attitudes. Such instances often sparked an emotional reaction and left students confused, frustrated or angry. In some cases, such instances became cultural encounter letters; more often, however, such instances went unexplored in the cultural encounter letter context because it appeared that students either could not articulate their thoughts and feelings enough to meet the one- to two-page requirement or they did not view such instances as viable cultural encounters.

Students' Perceptions of German Class and Their Instructor's Expectations

A few days after we visited the local Gymnasium (high school), where we toured the school and engaged in a discussion about stereotypes and current events with a group of German students, Dr. Bauer arranged for a Kegelabend (bowling evening). The students spent the evening with the German Gymnasium students learning how to play the game and chatting informally in German and English with their new acquaintances. The next day, students made several positive comments about the evening with the German students. Some students have even continued meeting up with the German youths during the week. In German class the morning after the Kegelabend, Dr. Bauer asked students to describe the differences between German Kegeln and American bowling. First in small groups, then as a class, students described the appearance of and how to play both games, specifically highlighting how the games differed.⁵⁷

Although Dr. Bauer addressed a wide range of topics and engaged students in numerous types of activities in his classes, identifying cultural differences was the focus on several occasions. Prior to visiting the local Gymnasium (high school), for example,

⁵⁷ Fieldnotes written in Mayen.

students were asked to think of questions focusing on cultural differences that they could ask the German students, and anticipate questions they might be asked by the German students. In another instance, Dr. Bauer told students that it is important to pay attention to cultural differences and therefore urged them on a class trip to Koblenz to walk around the city in small groups noticing the differences. Later in the program, after students were serendipitously able to visit a local polling site on election day to learn about the German voting process, Dr. Bauer asked students to explain the differences between elections and voting practices in the U.S. and Germany. The activity of identifying cultural differences is germane because it seemed to weigh heavily in students' cultural encounter choices.

In class sessions following students' weekend travels, Dr. Bauer typically asked each student to briefly speak in German about one place they visited and specifically highlight the cultural differences they noted. The following fieldnote excerpt from a Monday class with the upper level students illustrates what students typically mentioned in their short individual presentations. In this particular session, Dr. Bauer had asked students to describe the differences between Mayen and the European cities they visited over the weekend.

Students sat, as usual, around three sides of the pushed-together rectangular tables and Dr. Bauer at the fourth. Tara volunteered to give the first presentation about her weekend visit to Brussels. Tara began by saying that Brussels looked different than other cities. While the buildings looked very old on the outside, everything was very new on the inside. In Brussels there was a large Marktplatz, many large buildings, and waffles were sold on the streets. Tara said she did not find the city very pretty, as there were few trees and parks.

Rachel then talked about her trip to Zurich. First, Rachel mentioned that in restaurants she always had to speak German. She described Zurich as very clean, explaining that there was no garbage except old gum here and there. The lake in Zurich was very blue and pretty; she could see to the bottom of the lake. Rachel mentioned that the food was very different than in Mayen, where there are only Döner and Pizza. In Zurich there was fondue, pasta, and many other different types of food. Rachel also explained that they used different money in Zurich, and

the city was also more expensive than Mayen. For example, it cost her 14 Euro for a beer and 10 Euro for a baguette.

Gwen described her excursion to nearby Mainz, which she characterized as dirty. She noted that there were benches to sit on and many types of food, such as Thai. Since elections were the following week, there were stalls in which the political parties sold cake and handed out balloons. Gwen said that people wanted to talk about the political parties. A stage was open that day on which girls wearing black “Unterwäsche” danced for a couple hours, which Gwen described as “sehr komisch.” As Gwen explained that the girls didn't do anything except dance she moved her upper body back and forth as a demonstration. Gwen also mentioned that Mainz was very new.

Olivia talked about Heidelberg. She said it rained but she still went up to the castle on the hill where you have a view of the city. Olivia mentioned that there is a giant keg on display at the castle. She noticed many Americans in the town, many American school kids. Olivia noted observing more tourism and souvenir shops in Heidelberg, and that the Hauptbahnhof (train station) was a bit far from Stadtzentrum (city center).

During Erin's talk about her trip to Cinque Terre, Italy, she mentioned that this area consisted of very small towns along the Mediterranean. She said the area was very beautiful and she saw many olive trees. She noticed that people speak to each other a lot and drink in the evenings. Erin mentioned that it is slower there and the food is different because there is a lot of pasta made by hand. She also noticed more birds that were larger than those in Mayen, and many people have motorbikes.⁵⁸

These presentations, which focused heavily on the objective level of culture, certainly provided students with an opportunity to practice their German speaking skills and develop vocabulary as they articulated the myriad differences they noticed. By talking to their classmates about these differences, students had something concrete and specific to reference and describe. Moreover, having spent at the most a few days in the location about which students reported, they would not have been able to move beyond the objective cultural differences most apparent to tourists. I address these reports because it appears that, on the whole, the practice of reporting to classmates about

⁵⁸ Fieldnotes written in Mayen. As noted in chapter 3, students spoke primarily German in class. I, however, took notes in English because I could more accurately record a translation of what students said than I could record their German, as students made numerous language errors.

cultural differences between cities or countries reinforced students' perception that cultural encounter letters should focus on an objective cultural difference.

Students' perception that they should focus their cultural encounter letters on an observable cultural difference is seen in students' descriptions of how they chose cultural encounter letter topics. For example, in a focus-group interview in Mayen, Andrew explained that he wrote what he believed Dr. Bauer wanted, namely "something about cultural differences." Similarly, Rachel said she thought the purpose of the cultural encounter letters was for students to "notice differences" because that was often the focus of class discussions. Likewise, Gwen noted that she "was sort of under the impression that we were supposed to write about things that were different...comparing a cultural difference," rather than, for example, specific encounters with people.

There were numerous intriguing experiences that students wanted to share, discuss, and learn more about; however, they were hesitant to label them cultural encounters and write about them in their letters. Students' hesitation appeared to revolve, in part, around their perceptions of what the faculty leader expected them to write about. Gwen explained her view as "you're always trying to figure out what your professor wants. It's in your best interest to give your professor what they have in mind when they assigned the assignment."⁵⁹ Students seemed to balance their interest in a certain topic with their interest in earning a good grade in the class or their desire to be regarded favorably by their instructor.

Some students were unsure what Dr. Bauer would think about the cultural encounters they chose to write about. Erin, for example, opted not to write about certain topics that intrigued her because "I thought, [Dr. Bauer] doesn't care about stuff like that

⁵⁹ Post-program individual interview.

so, whatever, I won't write about it."⁶⁰ In another instance, Ryan and Andrew encountered what they felt was a startling problem with the native German instructor.

Ryan and I were under the impression that we were helping the class because very few people would talk and speak up. Often [the instructor] would say something and there would be a two minute pause because no one understood what she had said. But she would look at us and let us somehow interpret it...So Ryan and I would ask questions and try to help explain, only to come to find out that we think we're helping but we're making her mad because she thinks we're joking around and not taking her seriously.⁶¹

Andrew and Ryan discovered that their classroom behavior had been interpreted by their instructor in a way that surprised them. They felt, as Ryan put it, that there were "differences with teachers and their relations with students" and they wanted to write about these differences in a cultural encounter letter. Ryan explained what he wanted to write about.

German teachers and German students, and German teachers and American students. There's a difference in the way we communicate with Frau Schmidt and Dr. Bauer. Granted, there's a language barrier but there's also other things that are a lot different than in the States. In the States they almost become friends for a while because you go talk and have coffee or whatever. Whereas here, it's just class and that's it.⁶²

Ryan found the difference between the relationships and ways of communicating between the students and the two instructors intriguing. Both students, however, said that although they had wanted to write a cultural encounter letter about this situation, they were reticent to do so because of their status as students. Andrew explained his hesitancy.

I really wanted to write, not about the situation, but like why, how cultures interpret helping someone out and goofing off...I wanted to write about like there's culture difference, like maybe it was a language barrier, but there was also like culture difference too...but I hesitated to write about it because I didn't want

⁶⁰ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁶¹ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁶² Focus-group interview in Mayen.

Professor Bauer to think I was, like, trying to make a statement or speak bad about another professor on the program.⁶³

Even though Andrew and Ryan wanted to write about an aspect of an occurrence that they considered intriguing and meaningful, neither of them wrote about it because they felt their action could be negatively interpreted. Because they were students, they felt they should not write about something that included a teacher.

Nathan was another student who chose not to write about certain topics, owing to his “respect” for Dr. Bauer.

I guess things I haven’t done are just out of respect or whatever. I think Dr. Bauer is cool and wouldn’t mind but just out of respect there are some things that I wouldn’t write about. Like beer is so much cheaper here and I get so much drunker here...I don’t really want to write about porn or sex shops, even though it’s totally different and one of the biggest differences and it’s something I’d tell my mom or my friends about, it’s still a school thing so I’m not going to talk about prostitutes on the street or whatever, you know what I mean? So I’d rather talk about how toilets flush differently or light switches or clothes, stuff like that.⁶⁴

There were cultural differences that Nathan found interesting and important; however, he chose not to write about them because the cultural encounter assignment is “still a school thing.” Because it was an assignment that his instructor read, Nathan felt he should not write about certain topics, even though he would readily talk to other people about them.

Language vs. Culture Learning

Students reported participating in the Mayen program primarily to improve their language skills and, as Anna put it, “become acquainted with the culture.”⁶⁵ For many students, language learning took precedence over culture learning, as language was

⁶³ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁶⁴ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁶⁵ Questionnaire # 1.

viewed as the more valuable skill to cultivate. Gwen, for example, who had been to Germany before, explained that language learning was her priority.

I've been to Germany before, like, so the cultural experience front is not really that important to me. I think I've noticed the large cultural differences and I'm struggling to find small ones to write about. I didn't have any expectations about that. I packed my clothes knowing what Germans wear. I knew what we were going to be having for breakfast every morning. The cultural differences weren't really a thing but just really I expected and hoped I would improve my verbal German to the extent I could talk comfortably, and depending on what subject I'm talking about, I think I've more or less done that...that's what I really wanted to get out of this just because that's the most applicable part if I were to get a job, you have to talk.⁶⁶

Other students shared Gwen's view that language learning was more important than culture learning, especially in their German classes. Ian, for example, commented that students in the lower level class "just learn about the culture."⁶⁷ Similarly, Ryan was unsatisfied with aspects of one of his German classes, citing an instance in which they learned and talked about German products, such as candy. "It's useless. What does this have to do with the language? Gummi bears are the culture? We haven't really learned anything about the language yet besides vocabulary. The only grammar was the imperative...the grammar will help you in the long run."⁶⁸

In and out of class, students' interest in advancing their German language skills seemed to trump culture learning for two reasons. First, I posit, language learning was the more transparent and explicitly fulfilling endeavor; students had had at least a few years' practice learning German and they used the German language to communicate on a daily basis. Additionally, from their prior learning experience and daily use, students possessed

⁶⁶ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁶⁷ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁶⁸ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

a sense of their language advances and deficiencies, could monitor their language development, and ask for and receive explicit feedback on their skills.

Second, and more importantly, the concept and process of culture learning remained a mostly implicit activity. Culture-specific learning was certainly addressed during the program, both in and out of class; however, the concept of culture learning was not explicitly presented or discussed. During the program it seemed that in students' eyes, culture learning became reduced to talking about things that after the first few weeks of the program no longer spoke to their experiences or what they found genuinely intriguing. Nathan, for example, noted, "The culture here, like in the [cultural encounter letter] things, I feel that the culture is, like, we just point out the differences."⁶⁹ Likewise, students expressed frustration with the limitations of focusing on cultural differences. Rae explained, "I'm so tired of talking about cultural differences it's not even funny. After you've been here for so long you don't even notice the differences."⁷⁰ Students seemed to tire of focusing on differences in objective culture and longed to delve into the observations, experiences, and interactions that intrigued and affected them in a deeper, more meaningful way. For the most part, however, students did not explicitly explore in their letters differences they encountered that stemmed from the subjective level of culture, often, it seemed, because students simply did not know what to say.

Some students, such as Gwen, found that although there were specific instances they wanted to write cultural encounters about, they could not figure out how to articulate what they wanted to say about them. "I had the idea I wanted to write about how Germans accept American stuff, American words, TV and whatnot, but Americans

⁶⁹ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁷⁰ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

aren't. But I never quite get to that because I just don't know how to word it,"⁷¹ Gwen explained. In describing another topic that she found intriguing but did not know "how to word it" Gwen attributed this difficulty to the topic being "just so vague." Similarly, Erin said there were instances she decided not to write about because she did not think she could write enough to meet the minimum length requirement.

...like learning German card games, playing Pictionary with my host family...I couldn't write a page on that. That was the other thing, like, I thought we were supposed to write about one thing, a topic. I think it would be easier if you could write about more than one. So I just try to pick something that I can get a page out of. I mean, there's only so much that you can write about something.

In Gwen and Erin's cases, as in other students', it seemed that while they began to be affected and intrigued by underlying subjective elements of culture, they were at a loss as to how to adequately articulate their thoughts and feelings. It seems that students' ideas about culture and cultural encounters began progressing from noticing the overt cultural differences to becoming aware of nuanced aspects of subjective culture. As Ryan noted, "gummy bears or cars...that's not so important...but *why* it is, *that's* German culture."⁷² However, even though students were becoming more interested in unearthing perspectives, they struggled against what they perceived to be a continued focus on the differences in objective culture, formed by their initial ideas of culture and culture learning, classroom discussions on cultural differences, their perceptions of their instructor's expectations, and the pull of language learning.

Host Families and Weekend Travel: Contexts for Cultural Encounters?

Mayen was chosen because our program emphasizes living in the cultural environment rather than just visiting great monuments of the past and present. A smaller town offers a better chance to get to know the people, their customs, and

⁷¹ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁷² Post-program individual interview.

their language. In Mayen, our students have the opportunity to develop personal relationships, as well as to experience daily life in Germany. By feeling welcome where they are studying, previous students have ventured from there and visited other places of interest. (– Mayen program Brochure)

In order to fulfill the Mayen program's goals of living in the cultural environment and developing relationships, it organizes a host family stay and several excursions and activities in and around Mayen, during which students can interact with native speakers of various ages. The program also encourages students to travel during their 3- and 4-day weekends, which, during the 2004 program, accounted for nearly half of students' entire 5-week stay in Mayen. In this section I discuss the host family and weekend travel program contexts as venues for students' cultural encounters, as the cultural encounter letters stemming from these contexts highlighted an intriguing culture learning conundrum.

*Host Families: "You feel like a guest, not a kid."*⁷³

Living with a host family is not only touted in the program brochure as a "highlight of the trip and a way to immerse yourself in the German language and culture," it is also a factor that drew students to the Mayen program. On pre-departure questionnaires, the majority of students rated living with a host family as the optimum program context for language and culture learning. As Rae noted, "the host family is the best thing because you really get to see how the Germans live."⁷⁴ I therefore found it interesting that the host family was the context for very few cultural encounter letters. When the host family did appear in students' cultural encounter letters, as will be elaborated in this section, students wrote about their host families' answers to their

⁷³Quote from Ryan. Focus group interview in Mayen.

⁷⁴Focus group interview in Mayen.

cultural questions, observations culled from participant observation in a host family activity or their recounting of conversations with their host family.

1. Answers to cultural questions.

Periodically students included information given to them by a host family member regarding a cultural question the student had. For example, in the following cultural encounter letter excerpt, Anna explains a confusing interaction she had in Mayen.

As I was walking home from class Tuesday, I heard a bell ringing from behind me. It was the kind of bell that many American children have on their bikes and seem to ring for no particular reason.

So, without looking behind me, I assumed the ringing bell came only from a playing child and continued walking. The bell kept ringing and was not getting any quieter as I was walking away, so I eventually turned around to see what was going on. There I found an adult man on the bicycle who was trying to pass me on the sidewalk, and who looked a little angry with me.

Anna explained in her letter that when her host mother overheard Anna tell Erin, her housemate, about this encounter she explained to Anna that it is not only children in Germany who have bike bells. “Adults have them as well and use them to warn people walking on sidewalks of their approach so they can move out of the way,” wrote Anna in her letter, paraphrasing her host mother. Hearing a German explain why something was the way it was seemed to help students understand the products and practices they noticed and cleared up students’ confusion. In such instances, the host family provided cultural information that students could only acquire from a local.⁷⁵

2. Observations made during participant observation in host family activity.

⁷⁵ Laubscher (1994) found that the semester and year-long study abroad students in his study employed key informants, such as host parents, as a way to obtain cultural information and learn about cultural differences.

Occasionally students wrote about observations made during an experience with their host family.⁷⁶ For example, in the following cultural encounter letter excerpt, Rae wrote about observations she made during a day trip to Brussels with her host family.

I realized that German cars are not meant for long voyages. I also discovered that their cars are very fuel efficient. It took us 3 hours to get to Belgium and only a half a tank of gas. In my car it would have taken a whole tank and then some. Their cars are so small there were five of us in my host families little Audi and we were jammed in like sardines. There is also a difference in the willingness of Germans to travel far distances. A 3 hour trip by car was a huge deal, my host mom packed a picnic. A 3-hour drive in Missouri is nothing. I drive an hour and 15 minutes to see my boyfriend every weekend. From his house its another 30 minutes to my parents house, so that is a total of 1 hour and 45 minutes I drive one way every weekend. When I told my host family this they nearly had a cow! But one must realize the huge difference in size between the US & German. It takes me 3 hours to get to Mizzou from my house but in germany in 3 hours you can be in a completely different country. With the rail system they have here there is no real need for anyone to have a car that is good for long journeys. I really wish the US would adopt a train system like they have here, but with the way the US is I doubt that would ever happen.

Because Rae's host family invited her on a day trip to Brussels, she had the opportunity to be a participant observer in a host family activity. As such, Rae was able to observe, experience, and discuss the cars Germans drive. She also learned about and compared German and American perspectives on distance, driving, and car size. Rae's host family provided her with a participant observation experience that she most likely could not have had on her own. This day trip also sparked a fruitful conversation between Rae and her family that delved into differing cultural perspectives.

3. Conversations about culture-specific topics.

Some students were afforded the opportunity to learn about culture-specific topics, such as schools, history, current events, and social issues, through conversations

⁷⁶ Laubscher (1994) also found that participant observation was a salient activity for students in learning about cultural differences while abroad.

with their host family. “Yesterday (Thursday) afternoon I sat down with my host mom and discussed many problems Germany is facing along with some US-German relations issues. It was very interesting!” wrote Rae in a letter detailing the culture-specific information she learned. “I thought this was so interesting to hear about. These are the things you can really only hear about from German people. The differences between here and the US are fun to discover especially when they come from a native of the country,” she said in her letter. Such conversations provided students direct access to learning about issues they could not directly observe, or perspectives on observations they have made but did not understand. Rae further explained that she wrote about conversations with her host mother because “I talk to my host mom a lot and she told me all types of differences... It’s really interesting to talk to her because she has great insight into things.”

The majority of the students who wrote cultural encounter letters stemming from the host family context lived with families who went above and beyond the minimum requirements set by the program. These host families engaged students in family activities, such as eating lunch and dinner, playing games, watching TV, conversing, and even taking weekend day-trips. Some students therefore not only had increased access to observing and participating in daily life, but were also, and perhaps more importantly, afforded the opportunity to ask questions and glean insight into German perspectives. Additionally, the ability of some of these host families to speak English with students, when the topic at hand surpassed students’ German ability, no doubt aided in students’ ability to plunge beneath the cultural surface. Erin, for example, described the parameters for speaking English and German with her host family.

I usually tell [my host mother and father] about school and what we do there and then what we do on the weekends. I've had other conversations with [my host mother] about other things but those usually end up on English because it's hard to understand.⁷⁷

While students perceived that living with a host family was a good idea because it offered them a way to be “directly in the culture” and a venue for speaking German, they seemed conflicted about their experience in Mayen. On one hand, students were well aware that the host families are only required to provide them with a room and daily breakfast. Students reported taking advantage of every opportunity to eat breakfast with their host families, even if that required waking up early to mesh with their host family's breakfast schedule. Students also appreciated that many families had to work and fulfill their own obligations during the week. Moreover, students seemed sympathetic to the challenges inherent in hosting a guest. “It's hard to invite someone into your family for five weeks”⁷⁸ Kaylee noted.

On the other hand, students were fond of their German hosts and indicated a strong desire for increased interaction with them.^{79,80} Andrew and Jesse, for example, stated that their host mother was very friendly and they often wanted to talk with her in order to “learn about culture.” When Jesse and Andrew were at home they frequently looked for their host mother but they often could not find her. While their host mother set

⁷⁷ Host family survey.

⁷⁸ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁷⁹ In their study on the host family living arrangement during study abroad, Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight (2004) found that students most frequently complained about the lack of involvement in family activities.

⁸⁰ It should also be noted that although many students expressed a desire to interact more with Germans, they sometimes appeared hesitant when presented such opportunities. In such instances, students typically arrived at a location as a group and were expected to mingle and speak with the Germans present. Such opportunities for interaction were contrived; students seemed to instead prefer the naturally occurring conversations with host families or Germans students with whom they happened to strike up conversations. Students, however, recognized the challenge of creating naturally occurring conversations during the Mayen program and expressed appreciation for the activities offered, as well as to the Germans who participated in them. This suggests that some students may need guidance in making contrived opportunities for interaction more meaningful and fulfilling.

out breakfast for them every day, she rarely ate with them. Jesse further explained the contact he had with their host mother.

I only speak with [my host mother] once a week other than hallo and tschuss. I have been gone every weekend and I stay in town most days to avoid the uphill walk over and over each time I go 'home'. We speak in German when we do speak and it is usually about what we did over the weekend and where I'm going next weekend. We've spoken about her family and her travels as well and other small talk like the planes that fly over Mayen or what she is up to for that day.⁸¹

As Jesse noted, students' interaction with their host families remained mostly on a superficial level, perhaps because students and families wanted to communicate in German. Other students who reported conversing with their host families also noted that the conversations revolved around small talk about students' schedules and weekend travel plans or experiences.

For the students whose host families did not invite them to interact beyond breakfast or quick small-talk conversations, students felt, to varying extents, distanced from their host families.⁸² Ryan and Nathan, for example, described feeling like there was a clear "border" between them and their host families. For Ryan, the border was created by the structure of the family's house.

[Two program participants] and I live on the first floor of their house. The boundaries are set, they live upstairs and we live on the first floor. We have our own bathroom, shower, and kitchen. It is essentially our own apartment. The family keeps us stocked with carbonated water, which I love so much. We do our own laundry, we share a washer and drier with the family. We live in their house but not with them.⁸³

⁸¹ Host family survey.

⁸² Wilkinson (2000) highlights similar comments made about their host families by students who participated in a short-term study abroad program in France. Students in this study noted, for example, that even though they liked their host family, they felt uncomfortable in the house, awkward at mealtimes, and like a "tenant" (p. 38).

⁸³ Host family survey.

Ryan explained that during a previous host family experience he spoke often with his host family and really felt like a member of the family. In Mayen, however, he felt a strict border between him and his host family, and he therefore felt like he remained a guest. "I like the fact that we basically live on our own. But, at the same time I miss the family interaction that I had on my previous exchange,"⁸⁴ Ryan explained.

Nathan also described feeling a sense of separation between him and his host family. When he first arrived in Mayen his host family invited him to travel to nearby towns. "I got to hang out with them. I was in a car...you know, they were arguing with each other, mom yelling at the kids. It was more like a family."⁸⁵ When the first weekend was over, however, Nathan had less contact with his host family. Sometimes he even felt uncomfortable being at the house during mealtimes.

I like my family a lot, I think my host mom is really cool...I don't have any problems. But it's weird 'cause you learn the boundaries real quick. They're real cool but then it's like they eat dinner at night but then they close the door in the kitchen and I'm in the other room watching TV. I mean, I know they're not like millionaires or anything but it's like, no invitation, just kinda close the door when they eat. My host mom will be, like, do you want some coffee or something? It's like, not I'm just gonna go get a pizza.⁸⁶

Even though Nathan understood that host families did not have to invite the students to dinner, an issue with the host family situation was that he felt that having to eat elsewhere encouraged the American students to spend more time with each other than their host family.

It kinda forces me to hang out more with the Americans. I think situations like that are forcing the Americans to stick more together. Rightly so, if all they were told was that they had to make us breakfast, then they shouldn't have to do any

⁸⁴ Host family survey.

⁸⁵ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁸⁶ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

more. We're not paying them that much, you know, but it's kinda forcing us to stick together.⁸⁷

Because most students were responsible for their lunches and dinners, they often ate and then spent their free-time together.⁸⁸ "It's convenient to hang out with the Americans...you just turn around and there they are⁸⁹" noted Austin. In an interview in Mayen, Eric explained a positive outcome of students spending free time together. "[We] played soccer against Germans. That's something you wouldn't [do] if you didn't hang out with the Americans. Also, we've been able to integrate some of the Gymnasium kids into our group. Yes, we hang out with the Americans, but we're hanging out with the Germans too." Although students enjoyed spending time with each other, some, such as Ryan, felt that they were missing a prime opportunity to speak German. He explained that "[Not eating all meals with the host family] detracts from the program because the families don't speak that much English and if you eat every meal with them you're going to be speaking German."⁹⁰

Students seemed reluctant to say anything negative about their host family and always added the qualifier that they understood that some families were simply meeting the minimum program requirements. For example, Austin, who referred to his host family on occasion as more of a landlord than a host family because he rarely saw them, still deemed his host family experience an overall "good situation."

The family is great. They are a lot of fun to hang out with. They have great senses of humor and are very thoughtful. However, I do not see them much. I wish I could spend more time with them. If I could change anything, I would want to

⁸⁷ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁸⁸ Students developing social networks within the study abroad program is an occurrence noted in other studies, such as Wilkinson (2000) and Citron (2002).

⁸⁹ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁹⁰ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

spend more time with them.⁹¹

Students seemed to truly enjoy the members of their host families, and most likely they did not want any negative comments to be viewed as personal attacks or to come across as ungrateful. Students simply wanted to spend more time with their German hosts so they could speak German and increase their understanding of German culture.

Despite students' desire for increased interaction with their host families, however, they also enjoyed their independence. Students often explained that what they liked and disliked about their host family was one and the same. "I like the fact that [my host mother] is happy to just let me come and go and not be upset if I'm not around a lot,"⁹² explained Jesse. "That also can serve as what I like the least because it seems like other students have a lot more going on with their host families." Erin also explained her view.

What I like most and least are kinda the same. I love that our family treats us like family and feeds us and lets us use their house like our house. But at the same time I sometimes feel like I do when I go home to my real home. That I should tell them where I'm going, what I'm doing, when I'm leaving, when I'll be back, etc.^{93,94}

Living with a host family during study abroad is often perceived as a potentially fruitful venue for meaningful linguistic and cultural learning due to the potential for interaction with native speakers; however, "interaction with competent native speakers assumes time and involvement with the family" (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002, p. 195). Additionally, some question the host family as the living situation that will provide

⁹¹ Host family survey.

⁹² Host family survey.

⁹³ Host family survey.

⁹⁴ Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight (2004) found that students living in host families in Spanish-speaking countries welcomed being treated as part of the family when families gave them certain attention and resisted such treatment when they felt a sense of parental protectiveness.

the most interaction and benefit for the students (e.g. Wilkinson, 2000; Hulstrand, 2006). For some students in the Mayen program, the host family context provided them with opportunities for participant observation, discussions about culture-specific topics, and gaining insight into their cultural questions. For many students, however, this learning opportunity was not available, as they did not interact with their German hosts beyond a superficial level. In many cases, students created stronger relationships with their program peers than their host family.

While it can be argued that students cannot be expected to create more than superficial relationships in a mere five weeks, the cultural encounter letters illustrate that students who engaged with their families beyond the minimum program requirements had increased access to learning about cultural perspectives. Since the program, albeit for valid reasons, only requires families to provide a room and breakfast, it seems to truncate opportunities for students to delve into the perspectives behind the products and practices of which students became cognizant. Moreover, students seem to become largely restricted to observing, rather than actively interacting with members of the host country.

Weekend Travel:

"It's so Cool to Hop a Train and be in Another Country in an Hour!"⁹⁵

Independent weekend travel was another factor that drew students to the Mayen program and created several opportunities for students. First, students were able to disengage from the group and strike out on their own or with a couple of friends. Second, students fulfilled their desire to explore Europe; several students stated that they studied

⁹⁵ Quote from Nathan. Focus group interview in Mayen.

abroad to learn about Europe, not just Germany. Third, travel presented experiences and situations that would not have been available to students had they remained in Mayen.⁹⁶

Weekend travel, however, also created a conflict for some students. Sometimes students seemed pulled in two directions by conflicting desires: remaining in Mayen, in order to spend time with their host families or new German acquaintances, and leaving Mayen, in order to explore other cities in Germany and surrounding countries. Although host families were often busy during the week, they were generally more available on the weekends. Tara, for example, once noted that because she lives on the third floor of the house she felt uncomfortable going uninvited to the second floor, where her host mother lived, to watch TV. Olivia, Tara's housemate, quickly noted that when she stayed in Mayen over a weekend, their host mother came upstairs and invited her to eat and watch TV with her. Olivia suggested that because she stayed in Mayen for that weekend, she had the opportunity to spend more time with their host mother than Tara.

For some students, the host family was not the only draw to remain in Mayen. Due to enthusiastically received program activities arranged by Dr. Bauer, the Mayen program students had increased opportunities to interact with local German youth. On one occasion, program participants spent an evening engaging in the German version of bowling with local high school students. Students greatly enjoyed the activity. "We should have a Kegelabend once a week!"⁹⁷ commented Nathan. After that evening, many began spending their free-time during the week with the German high school students. Conflicts quickly arose, however, when students began having to choose between weekend invitations from the German students and the pull of using their Eurail pass and

⁹⁶ Laubscher (1994) identified travel as one of three ways the students in his study learned about cultural differences outside class.

⁹⁷ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

traveling with their program peers. Although they wanted to remain in Mayen, students had purchased expensive Eurail passes and naturally desired a good return on their investment. Nathan explained his experience with this conflict. Although he wanted to spend more time with the locals, their invitations conflicted with his travel plans.

A lot of times...it was like, [the German students would say] "let's hang out, but we don't get out of school until Friday night" and it was like, oh, Friday night I'll be in Paris, dude. You know, it's like, sorry. So it's like, I don't know, I wish there was more to hang out with, high school or university, you know, kids our age, whatever, like seeing what they're doing or going to "Rock am Ring." But it kind of conflicts with the travel schedule and I think I'd rather, like, travel. I mean, hang out and get drunk in somebody's basement, even though it's fun and you get to know the people, you know, looking back I think I'd feel cheated if I didn't see Paris while I was here. So that's kind of a problem.⁹⁸

For Nathan, even though he seemed to feel conflicted, the opportunity to travel trumped spending time with his new German acquaintances because he felt he would regret not seeing Europe more than not spending time with the locals.⁹⁹

The push and pull to stay in Mayen or travel during the weekends highlight the conflicts and trade-offs created by competing program contexts. On one hand, the program creates potentially fruitful opportunities for students to develop relationships with native speakers through the homestay and program activities. Developing relationships with host culture members is a crucial element in culture learning (Cushner, 2004).

It is in this stage that relationships have begun to crystallize and more meaningful culture learning can take place. While the time required to reach this phase varies depending on any number of factors (family support, individual coping strategies, linguistic competence, degree of cultural gap, etc.), it is here that significant

⁹⁸ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

⁹⁹ Citron (2002) noted that the students in his study "described a 'short-timer's attitude" (p. 45) toward being abroad, since they always knew they were going home at the end of the semester. As students progressed through their semester in Spain, they became increasingly aware of their impending departure and decreasingly motivated to "live life on Spanish terms or to become close to those whom they would soon be leaving" (p. 45). Moreover, students traveled to several European destinations on the weekend, citing the opportunity as something that only happens once in a lifetime.

culture learning begins to occur. Likened to the “bottom of the U curve,” this is the point where people begin to understand another’s perspective and more accurate attributions about behaviors begin to occur. Key to success at this phase is the interpersonal relationships that develop. When safe, supportive, and trusting relationships have formed, be they with host families, local friends, or teachers, people begin to open up, expose their inner feelings and thoughts, and more freely inquire about many of the questions and concerns they may have. (p. 75-76)

However, the weekend travel context seems to constrict these relationship-building opportunities because students are encouraged to spend nearly half of their time traveling away from Mayen rather than spending time with the locals.

On the other hand, however, it is noteworthy that the students wrote far more cultural encounter letters stemming from weekend travel than the host family setting, program activities or time spent with German acquaintances in Mayen. What is more, these letters illustrate that weekend travel produced opportunities for observation, interaction, and reflection that students could not have had in Mayen. As the following four cultural encounter letters exemplify, travel afforded students the occasion to gain European perspectives on Germany, interact with native speakers, recognize variation within Germany, and self-reflection.

Weekend travel enabled some students to come into contact with unexpected reactions and perspectives that students would not have encountered in Germany. In the following cultural encounter letter excerpt, Jesse describes an interaction he had with a Belgian store clerk.

In Belgium, Brugge to be exact, I went into a lace store because appearantly Belgium is known for its lace. I ended up purchasing something small and when she rang me up I said *dankschon* even though the transaction had taken place in english . One of the people around me ended up telling her we were students studying german and this seemed to disturb her. She got a expression of disgust and asked in an obviously negative tone why we would want to learn german . I just stood there for a few seconds and the she began saying how german was

completely different than what I'd assume would be Flemish since that is the predominant language in the northern part of Belgium but she didn't explain that.

The Belgian woman's response surprised Jesse and subsequently sparked reflection on his preconceived notions regarding how people might react to him due to his nationality and native language, as well as how other European citizens might view Germany and why.

Either way this encounter was unusual to me. I expected that if I received any 'hate' based on my citizenship or language that it would be that I am from the U.S., not that I am learning German. This woman was older, perhaps mid to late 60's, so maybe she had resentment left from the post WWII era she grew up in and has never let it go. Perhaps she is upset about recent events or E.U. relationships that I don't know about. Either way it caught me a little off guard and was surprising to me.

Had Jesse remained in Mayen, he most likely would not have encountered a Belgian's view of Germany, which sparked reflection on his ideas regarding how he would be treated in Europe, and how Europeans might view Germany. Gwen also had an experience in Italy that allowed her to view Germans from a different perspective. In the following excerpt, Gwen explains the situation she observed.

Like many European cities Verona features many tourist destinations and is, accordingly, full of tourists. I have observed primarily American, British, Asian (more specifically I can't tell but I'm guessing Japanese), and German tourists, as well as Italian tourists from other cities. Different groups have different behaviors but what I find interesting is the way they are each treated by the native Veronese. Italian tourists do not seem to be treated differently at all, similarly to the way a Michigan resident would treat an Illinoisan. Asian tourists are mostly ignored, as most seem to speak no Italian and little if any English and are reliant upon a tour guide bearing flags or antennas. Americans & British tourists are most easily recognizable by their shoes and attempts to try out Italian on menus and signs, and are treated somewhat patronizingly by the Veronese as almost none speak any Italian whatsoever and are simultaneously completely lost and awed by their surroundings, as well as loaded down with armfuls of Italian clothes to try on.

As Gwen's letter continued, she detailed her observation of Italians interacting with Germans, which prompted her to consider possible reasons for the treatment she witnessed.

Germans are scorned somewhat; although I've tried to be objective, every German tourist I've seen as of yet has appeared pushy and rude, ordering food without saying please or thank you in either German or Italian and pushing past others in lines. The Veronese seem to look down on them and most emphatically stress that they do not speak German while those that do switch to English at the first opportunity. I wonder how much bad blood, if there is any, still exists from World War II? Or is the Italians' response to typical "Germanness" just the natural one of a more friendly/outgoing people to a more private, matter-of-fact one?

Both Jesse and Gwen's letters illustrate that travel not only provided them with additional perspectives on Germans and Germany through interaction and observation, but also sparked students' contemplation about Germany's role and place in historical and current Europe.

Travel also provided students with increased opportunities to interact with native speakers, as some students used the weekends to visit German friends. In one instance, a group of students traveled to Munich together to visit one of the program participant's German friends. As Erin noted in a cultural encounter letter, this trip gave students the chance to "experience not only the touristy side of München (like the Hofbräuhaus, Olympiastadium, churches, shopping, etc.) but also the lives of people who live in München. They were so nice to us. They kept inviting us to all these things and offering to show us real Bavarian life." Their Munich hosts not only gave them a tour of the city but also invited them to a BBQ, stag night party, and traditional Bavarian breakfast the following morning. Students noted that they not only saw the sights but also learned

cultural information about the city. Moreover, students were able to interact with native speakers and ask questions.

For Andrew, the trip to Munich was an opportunity to broaden his view of Germany by becoming aware of variation within the country. In the following excerpt, Andrew describes a brunch in Munich and his conclusions about differences between Bavaria and other parts of Germany.

This weekend I was able to travel to München. It is a very pretty city with much to do and see. The people of Bayern seem to be different than the other Germans I have met so far. The Bavarians seem to really concentrate on the way they do things. For example, we met a group of Germans who invited us to an early morning brunch. The brunch consisted of Weißwurst and Weißbier. It was at this brunch I truly felt that the people of Bavaria have a completely different culture than the rest of Germany.

At the brunch, I learned how to pour a Weißbier. The technique in pouring the beer is relatively simple, but it takes some time. The brunch was also a demonstration of how to correctly prepare Weißwurst. At the brunch, one of the patches of Wurst apparently turned out wrong. They looked fine to me, but our German friends insisted they were bad and must be thrown out. This theme of striving for perfection and excepting nothing else was very apparent during my time in München. This weekend I always felt that the Bavarians prided themselves on perfection, excellence, and efficiency in everything they did. My experience in München led me to believe that in Bavaria perfect beer, excellent food, and extremely efficient public transportation is not just an idea, but rather, it is a way of life that Bavaria refuses to let go. This is not to say that other parts of Germany are inefficient or bad in any way. Rather, all parts of Germany (that I have experienced) are great, but Bavaria's culture is noticeably different from the rest of Germany.

During the brunch that Andrew described, his observation that "Bavarians seem to really concentrate on the way they do things" seems to support his conclusion, developed from the weekends' observations and experiences, that "Bavarians prided themselves on perfection, excellence, and efficiency in everything they did." Regardless of the accuracy of Andrew's conclusion, what is important here is that travel provided him with the opportunity to learn about, observe, and experience a different part of Germany. By

leaving Mayen, Andrew was able to observe behavior patterns that seemed to differ from what he had noticed in Mayen.

Travel also placed students in frustrating situations that sparked valuable personal reflection. Rachel, for example, wrote a letter about her attempts to communicate with people in the Netherlands. In the following excerpt, Rachel explains the situation in which she found herself.

On saturday, my brother and I decided to leave amsterdam and head to Brussels for a day and a half. I had heard that Belgium was a neat place to visit so of course I had to check it out! Since it is the EU headquarters (or so I heard), I expected to be able to communicate with everyone there, but that definitely was not the case. The only people that could speak English were people at the train station, hotel, and most of the shops but most of the time their speaking was not very good. On the way to the Place, a popular touristy part of town, my brother and I got lost. My first reaction was to ask the first locals who came by how to get where we wanted to go. Of course, they didn't speak any English. So, after a few minutes of pointing to places on the map and trying to communicate, they ended up taking us to the train station and showing us what trams to take, where to get off, etc. Every number was written down in order to understand each other. Thankfully, we got to where we needed to go but only because of the help from two Belgian Girls we ran into on the street.

Rachel also reflected on her experience trying to obtain directions after she and her brother became lost in Brussels.

This was a big cultural experience for me because I have never run into so many people before that I couldn't communicate with. It really amazes me that there are so many languages out there that are completely different and yet the whole world can communicate. I'm glad that I had this encounter with those two girls though because it really allows me to be able to appreciate the fact that in most places people have learned my language in order to help me communicate with them!

Frustrating as this incident was, it sparked Rachel's reflection on language and communication, as well as her expression of appreciation for people who have learned English. Had Rachel not traveled outside of Germany, she would not have had the same communication predicament.

As the previous cultural encounter letters illustrate, travel provided students with enriching opportunities they most likely could not have had in Mayen. Rachel's frustrating experience in Belgium made her more aware and appreciative of the fact that many Europeans have learned English. Jesse and Gwen widened their perspective of Germany by learning how people in neighboring countries view and interact with Germans. Andrew's perspective of Germany became more differentiated when he noticed differences between Bavaria and other parts of the country.

Students also commented that traveling to other countries made them realize how much they had learned about Germany and how well they had adapted to living there. Students often reported that travel made them realize how "at home" they began to feel in Germany. As Erin noted at the end of a cultural encounter letter, "Once we saw the Deutsche Bahn pull up with its German speaking attendants and conductor we were so happy to just be going home."

Cultural Encounter Letters: Just Pointing Out the Differences?

Even though students sometimes remarked that they merely pointed out cultural differences in many of their cultural encounter letters, it became clear that students sometimes grappled with deep and meaningful issues. This section explores students' investigation of their national and personal identity, as well as the ways in which students questioned their cultural interpretations in their cultural encounter letters and demonstrated their ability to recognize, and see from, different cultural perspectives.

Exploring the Other, Exploring Themselves

On the last day of class, Dr. Bauer asked students to share what they learned during their time in Mayen. Students nodded in agreement when Jesse ventured that he felt he learned more about himself than anything else. Indeed, students' cultural encounter letters illustrate that as they explored the target culture they simultaneously explored their own. As Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, and Colby (2003) outlined in their conceptual model of culture learning, "learning about the self as a cultural being" (p. 177) is a primary goal of the culture learning process. This section describes the way in which students explored their national and personal cultural identity.

Soon after arriving in Mayen, students became aware of the prevalence of American music, TV shows, and movies in Germany. In several letters students noted their surprise upon recognizing songs in cafés, sit-coms on TV, and movies advertised at the cinema. In such letters students often detailed the various locations and contexts in which they noticed various forms of U.S. American media. For example, in the following cultural encounter letter excerpt, Eric explained how he discerned that the U.S. American music he heard was not merely for the sake of the visiting students, but was rather part of something larger.

When I first met [my host mom], we drove to her home, and in the car...American music! I would have thought this was done perhaps to ease me into Germany, and possibly alleviate some of my home-sickness, but then one morning while eating breakfast, I noticed the same radio-station (91.6) was playing music with German lyrics. This can only lead me to believe that American music has become integrated into German culture.

As in Eric's cultural encounter letter, students seemed to be looking for patterns in what they observed in order to make sense of what they witnessed. Many students were initially unaware of the U.S. American influence in other countries, or at least did not

expect the extent of the influence they noticed. “I was also caught by surprise when I could recognize every song played [in the bar]. I was aware that Europeans listen to American music but I didn’t expect it to be playing non-stop in the bar” commented Rachel in a letter. Alexis noted in a letter that “I’d heard that there was a lot of American entertainment shown in Europe, but I didn’t think it dominated as much as it did when I was watching [T.V.]. Perhaps it is different during other times of day, but it seemed really strange to come all the way here and see what I see at home.”

Music, TV, and movies were the first U.S. American influences that students noticed and this observation opened a door to further exploration and reflection. For example, once students realized the prevalence of U.S. American music, some students were puzzled as to why Germans would listen to music in a language they might not understand. As Alexis noted in a cultural encounter letter:

Almost every song that I heard was in English and I don’t think that I heard any music in German. I know it’s common for German artists to record music in English, but it seems really odd not to hear any German at all. My host sister had turned the radio on, and she has told me that she is not good with English – so, I think it’s a bit funny that most of what is accessible is American pop music that she doesn’t understand.

Among students’ descriptions of the U.S. sitcoms on German T.V. or their experience watching a movie dubbed into German were hints of their delving deeper into underlying perspectives. As the previous excerpt shows, Alexis probed the motivation behind listening to music, despite not necessarily being able to understand the lyrics. By noticing and investigating the prevalence and acceptance in Germany of media in another language from another culture, Alexis inched towards reflecting on her own cultural perspectives that led her to characterize her host sister’s behavior as “funny.”

A more explicit way that students explored and reflected on U.S. American perspectives in their cultural encounter letters was by making overt cultural comparisons, and sometimes also forming cultural hypotheses. For example, after pondering a Mayen restaurant experience, Andrew wrote a cultural encounter letter about restaurants in Germany and the U.S.

This afternoon a group of MSU students ate at the Chinese Buffet. We entered the restaurant around noon and we did not leave until around 1.45 pm. The restaurant never got busy, and we were never asked to get up and leave after we were one. In the United States restaurants do not typically allow their customers to sit around and talk for an hour after they have had their meal.

Today, I have been giving this concept a great deal of thought, and I think there are two reasons why restaurants allow the customers to stay and relax after their meal. First, Europe seems to have a large number of little cafés and restaurants. This large number of restaurants results in very little turn over for the restaurant business. In other words, restaurants do not expect to move people in and out during the lunch hour because the[y] are competing with so many other restaurants. Therefore, they simply allow their customers to take their time in order to show appreciation for their business. Secondly, the European and/or German lifestyle seems to move at a slower pace. They tend to sit down, eat slowly, and have long conversations at the table. In America, people have thirty minutes for lunch, and therefore, they get in, get out and get back to work. An American would never consider having a two hour lunch break. I must say I find the German/European attitude towards dining much more appealing than the American concept, but I am not so sure Americans would enjoy a two hour lunch break. I think Europeans enjoy their more relax approach towards their daily routine, and I believe Americans love to be in constant movement. I do not believe one way is superior to the other, rather, I just think these two different approaches are the perfect fit for the respective cultures.

In his letter, Andrew concludes that “there are two reasons why restaurants allow the customers to stay and relax after their meal” in Germany, and makes comparisons between his observations of eating in German restaurants and his experience with U.S. American restaurants. Andrew clearly explores not only restaurant practices in Germany, but also practices in the U.S. Moreover, Andrew looks beneath the surface of these practices to unearth what he sees were the differing underlying perspectives when he

states that “I think Europeans enjoy their more relax[ed] approach towards their daily routine, and I believe Americans love to be in constant movement.” It seems that he no longer completely identifies with the American perspective when he notes that while he finds the “German/European attitude appealing,” he does not think other Americans would.

Students also explored cultural practices and underlying perspectives on a more personal level. In the following cultural encounter letter excerpt, Eric reflected on differing perspectives regarding the employment of a house cleaner.

About the most general observation I have made the past five weeks in Mayen is that my guest parents have money. This is evident by their home, their trips, and their lifestyle.

But I’ve noticed one thing consistent with other families here in Mayen that are rather wealthy, yet differs from some of the families I know in America. It involves the services of cleaning-ladies, or “Putz Fraus.”

I know of several families here in Mayen who employ the services of maids. I don’t know if this just goes against some of my values that I obtained in my upbringing, but I would almost certainly never hire a maid. Even from a similar economic level I was taught to take pride in doing that kind of work for yourself. “If it’s your mess, clean it up” says a little plaque hanging in my parent house, no doubt symbolizing more than just clutter. And I’m certainly not pointing fingers here, just stating something that I’ve noticed.

What is unique about Eric’s letter is that he is the only student to explicitly state that his values might have influenced his position that he would “certainly never hire a maid.” Eric ruled out economic status as a reason for the difference because he determined that he shares “a similar economic level” with the German families he observed. He then reflected on his upbringing, noting that he was “taught to take pride” in doing your own cleaning.

Exploring and Questioning Their Cultural Interpretations

One weekend, Kaylee and another program participant traveled to Paris. In a cultural encounter letter following that weekend Kaylee detailed various mishaps that occurred during the excursion to Paris, as well as her interpretation of events.

The taxi driver then scammed us and drove us in circles and charged 25E for what we later found out would have only been about 5E. The streets were so so dirty and there were gypsies everywhere!

...

I think that Paris is a beautiful place that could be so much better if the people had a better attitude, especially because we were in Paris where there are constant tourists, it seems that if the people are that unhappy with seeing/dealing with Americans they would be doing something else.

In this excerpt from her letter, Kaylee makes interpretations about what she sees and experiences in Paris, claiming, for example, that she has been “scammed” by the taxi driver and proposing that Parisians need a “better attitude.” Then, however, at the conclusion of her letter, Kaylee questioned herself. “I have to wonder if this is a reflection of French people – people in Paris or just the people we dealt with?” she asked.

Kaylee’s letter is representative of others in that students sometimes questioned the accuracy of their interpretations in their cultural encounter letters. While students explained that they often mulled over topics prior to pen meeting paper, there were times in which students quickly penned cultural encounter letters that essentially recorded their “initial reactions.” Cultural encounters that sparked such letters seemed to touch a nerve and ignite a strong emotional reaction. For example, in reflecting on a “very strongly worded” cultural encounter she wrote about body odor, Erin explained that she wrote the letter in the midst of what was at that moment the worst experience of the trip. “I wrote

[that letter] on the train. That's where I did most of my homework."¹⁰⁰ Kaylee made a similar comment about one of her cultural encounter letters, noting that "It was probably not a big deal, if I think about it now. But that day it was."¹⁰¹ On the heels of such emotional reactions written in the heat of the moment, however, were insightful and probing questionings of their interpretations.

Alexis wrote a cultural encounter letter about being spoken to in English after the German man who was assisting her in a store in Mayen saw her U.S. passport. The final paragraph of her letter follows.

From that point on he continued to speak to me in English (which was far better than my German) even when I spoke back to him in German. It was frustrating to try so hard and have the other person not meet me halfway. Perhaps he was just trying to be helpful or he wanted to be done and knew that English would be faster – but it was still frustrating. I was trying to make an effort to speak his language & I was met with my own. This is not the first time this has happened to me, and I'm sure it won't be the last, but it's still annoying (good intentions though they might have been).

While it is evident that Alexis was frustrated, she viewed the situation from both her perspective and her interlocutor's as she wrote her letter. Alexis stated that by speaking English to her, the German man is "not meeting [her] halfway." Then she suggests reasons for why the man might have spoken English with her, such as "trying to be helpful." While she reiterates her feeling of frustration, Alexis also states that she recognizes that such behavior might have represented "good intentions."

Rae's letter also shows an awareness that she might have made incorrect interpretations. The following excerpt is from the beginning of her cultural encounter letter.

¹⁰⁰ Post-program individual interview.

¹⁰¹ Post-program individual interview.

I cannot even count the number of times I have been waiting in line somewhere (at the store, cash register, in the bakery, at the fruit stand, to get on a train, to buy tickets, to use a public WC, basically anywhere there is a line to be found) and some random German just walks up and cuts in front of you. I don't know about what is kosher in Germany but in the US people get really upset when someone does this. It is very rude and extremely unpolite (and Germans have the nerve to say we are unpolite !)

In this passage, Rae makes several negative interpretations and evaluations of German's behavior and intentions. She does, however, also point out that she is making interpretations based on what she deems appropriate behavior in the U.S. Rae then explores her interpretations even further in the rest of her letter.

But perhaps I don't quite understand something, maybe the line jumpers aren't line jumpers at all maybe they believe they are waiting in line with me instead of behind me, because it always feels like someone is right on top of me. These people have no concept of personal space. I can't believe it took me this long to recognize this because I have a mild case of closterphobia, not to mention I really don't like strange people to touch me. Every time I would go somewhere where there was a crowd I would feel very uncomfortable & uneasy – now I have figured out why. Maybe the Germans feel more comfortable standing next to (or on top of) one another because that's how they live. Their houses are right on top of one another, if you go to a restaurant you sit right on top of one another, I hope you don't need to go anywhere in a car with more than 2 people, because the rest of you will be riding on top of each other. So I see how they can find comfort in robbing one of their personal space, while they don't have their own.

Rae suggested that she might not understand the behavior she observed, that Germans might see their behavior differently, and explained that her interpretation could stem from feeling “like someone is right on top of me.” Even though Rae vacillated between recognizing that her interpretations might be incorrect and making additional interpretations, she seemed to realize that Germans might interpret the situation differently than she did, even citing examples of the way Germans live that support their behavior.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Since I discussed students' pre-Mayen ideas about culture and culture learning earlier in this chapter, in this section I briefly address students' ideas as they appeared in the second and third questionnaires.¹⁰² Then, I present and discuss students' comments, concerns, and suggestions regarding the cultural encounter letter assignment, as they offer ideas to consider with regards to facilitating culture learning during a short-term study abroad program. Finally, I close the chapter by addressing students' characterization of the Mayen program as an experiment.

Students' Definitions and Ideas: Culture

Students' definitions about culture remained largely the same on the three questionnaires that they filled out. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, students' definitions centered primarily on elements in the objective level of culture. However, it is noteworthy to mention that a few students' definitions, as seen on the third questionnaire, seemed to illustrate an exploration of ideas, as opposed to simply repeating a definition previously learned. Eric, for example, pondered the objective and subjective levels of culture using his own words.

Culture is the set of customs that make up everyday life. What food they eat, what drinks they drink, what language they speak. These are among the more obvious elements of culture. What does not present itself to the green eye involves things along the lines of how a society feels about certain things, specifically things that have augmented who the group is in their history. There is much more than meets the eye about the culture of a people.¹⁰³

The importance here, I suggest, is not the actual definition of culture that students wrote down. Rather, some students seemed to break free of repeating "textbook" definitions, as

¹⁰² Students filled out the first questionnaire before the Mayen program, the second just before leaving Mayen, and the third a few months after the Mayen program ended.

¹⁰³ Questionnaire # 3

they wrote lengthier explanations using their own words, ideas, and examples from their life experiences. In such instances, it seemed that students were exploring the concept of culture and making this exploration their own.

It also seemed that students expressed their own ideas about culture in their own words in their responses on the third questionnaire to a question asking how their definitions had changed since participating in the Mayen program, and who or what influenced any changes. Following are excerpts from three students.

- I have seen that it is really hard to identify exactly what one culture is. There are so many aspects of culture, that it is very hard to say exactly what culture is. Traveling to different places in Germany and around Europe definitely influenced my definition of culture. (Brooke)
- My definition has not really changed since returning from Germany, but by experiencing culture different from the American culture, it has helped me realize that there is not one acceptable culture. I would have to say that my surroundings have definitely influenced my definition of culture. This would include the people I interact with. (Rachel)
- My views of what culture is has not significantly changed as a result of my experiences in Mayen. It did expose me to more visible differences between my culture and the culture of others and made me put into words what my view of culture is. I find this to be a good exercise because every time I find different words to do so. I have 22 years of people and things influencing my definition of culture and I do not think I could accurately pinpoint where my definition has come from. (Jesse)

From answers such as these, it is apparent that students' experiences abroad in some way complicated their ideas about culture. Some students commented that their definitions of culture had broadened, while others' had narrowed. While many students stated that their definition of culture had not significantly changed after participating in the Mayen program, they seemed to be somewhat less definite in their ideas and addressed complexities they noticed. As Jesse stated, each time he is called to describe culture he finds he uses different words.

Students' Definitions and Ideas: Culture Learning

Culture learning, according to students, continued to comprise actions that would afford them culture-specific access, information, and experiences. On the second questionnaire, filled out at the close of the Mayen program, students made comments such as the following in response to a question about how students maximized culture learning while abroad.

- I tried to be in the city as much as possible. I didn't want to sit in my house the majority of the trip. By being in the city, I could see how Germans acted and interacted. (Brooke)
- The best "strategy" I thought of was interacting with my host family and the Germans I met while I was here. I didn't really learn anything about culture in class. Also I picked up some new stuff from travelling on the weekends. Just watching and listening and talking but mostly observing was a good way to learn about culture. (Gwen)
- I did my best to "act like a German." Some mornings there would be food that I was definitely afraid to try but I sucked it up and tried it anyways. During the soccer games I also went to the pubs and took in the locals attitudes as well! (Rachel)
- When I noticed an activity...that was different here I always tried to participate (or try a new food or whatever). (Anna)

Thus, as was seen on the first questionnaire, culture learning continued to primarily comprise being observant, participating in activities, acting like a local, asking native speakers for explanations, and keeping an open mind about cultural differences.

Students also noted the importance of separating themselves from the group in order to speak with and learn from Germans.

I would recommend that the student immerse themselves in Mayen life. To that end I do not imply that the student should ignore other Mayen study abroad participants, but the student will NOT learn anything about culture if he/she does

not strike out on their own, make contacts, meet new people, see new things, learn new stories.¹⁰⁴ (Gwen)

I found such remarks interesting for two reasons. First, during the program students often noted the difficulty in disengaging from the group because most of the students lived with another program participant, spent time together during class and other program activities, and often ate meals and traveled together. Second, students also expressed their hesitation to, as Nathan put it, “just go up to Germans at a bar,”¹⁰⁵ in order to interact with Germans and participate in daily activities and learn about German culture. This idea also fits with students’ ideas that culture learning involves placing oneself in the culture. However, most students spent the majority of their time abroad with other program participants. Moreover, the program structure is such that students cannot help but spend the majority of their time together. While in Mayen, Gwen pointed out the problem with which students grappled.¹⁰⁶ “As far as hanging out with Americans, it’s a fine line because you want the solidarity and not be an outsider. But the more you hang out with them, the less German you speak.” It seemed that students felt an implicit expectation, and expressed an explicit desire, to spend their time abroad interacting with Germans; however, the program structure and, as previously mentioned, the host family living situation, did not always actively support such conditions.

Cultural Encounter Letters: Awareness vs. Understanding

In interviews after the Mayen program ended, students reported that writing about their cultural encounters was a worthwhile activity because it “forced” them go beyond

¹⁰⁴ Questionnaire # 3

¹⁰⁵ Focus group interview in Mayen.

¹⁰⁶ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

simply noticing that a cultural difference existed. Knowing they had to identify a cultural encounter, students' awareness of their cultural surroundings was heightened.

It made you think about stuff the entire time. You're always looking for something so I think that kind of opened us up for more cultural experiences. A lot of times you could easily see something or do something and just brush it off. But when you're thinking about all the time it made us, or me rather, think about stuff more. Like what is culturally different and what is a new experience for me? It just made us more aware of what was going on.¹⁰⁷ (Olivia)

Had students not been required to write the cultural encounter letters, "I wouldn't really think about it. It would just be...[an] on-the-spot thing,"¹⁰⁸ said Ian. Even though writing the letters sometimes became "tedious," students reported recognizing benefits. "It's kind of important to be like, wow, this is different, this would never happen in the States,"¹⁰⁹ explained Rachel. For Tara, there were clear benefits, both during and after the program.

It [gave] me something to remember afterwards. And it's stuff I probably would have heard in passing but not really think about. But having to write it down, and thinking, what did I hear, how can I relate it to this situation? So ya, I do think it help[ed]. It made me search and look for information and it gave me a reason to go up to strangers and go, so what do you think about this?...It made me have more conversations.¹¹⁰

Students' awareness of their cultural surroundings even extended beyond the Mayen program. Some students reported noticing, considering, and writing about cultural encounters during their post-program travel, and for two students in particular, during their second summer study abroad program.

Students said that since they had to write a page or two about their cultural encounters, they spent more time and effort processing, pondering, and formulating a "coherent reason for why it's happening," than had they not been required to write them

¹⁰⁷ Post-program individual interview.

¹⁰⁸ Post-program individual interview.

¹⁰⁹ Post-program individual interview.

¹¹⁰ Post-program individual interview.

down. “I did probably reflect a bit deeper on these just because I had to write them down and make them coherent, rather than random thoughts streaming around my head,”¹¹¹ said Eric. Writing about the letters pushed students to delve deeper into their cultural encounters in a more systematic way. “We had to write a whole page. So, I had to think about the topic and kind of gather evidence about what I’ve seen, try to understand it more,”¹¹² noted Ian.

Writing about self-identified cultural encounters raised students’ awareness of them more than if they had not had such an assignment to complete. Some students commented, however, that while they noticed many more differences, they did not necessarily understand them any better.

I guess I learned the differences but I didn’t understand them. Like the thing about whole closed doors thing. I didn’t understand why they did that. It still didn’t make sense to me even after writing it. But it got me to recognize, which I thought was important...it was worthwhile. (Ian)

Ian’s quote illustrates students’ longing to understand the perspectives underlying the cultural differences in the products and practices they became aware of. Students began to realize that there was more to understand than what they were seeing, and they wanted to gain this understanding of the “reasons behind” the cultural differences they noticed. Ryan commented that “in [Frau Schmidt’s] class we had to give little reports about gummy bears or cars...not so important...but like food and then why it is, that’s German culture.”¹¹³

Anna found that towards the end of the program she was also digging deeper into her cultural encounters. “At the beginning I wasn’t looking as much into the reasons for

¹¹¹ Post-program individual interview.

¹¹² Post-program individual interview.

¹¹³ Post-program individual interview.

things but toward the end I was thinking about reasons that would make it happen,”¹¹⁴ she explained. Similarly, Ian found himself narrowing his topics and wanting to understand why things were the way they were.

The beginning ones were like, not superficial, but more broad...The further on I got ,the more I got, like, noticing specific things like the culture and the areas I was in and comparing them to America or Germany...instead of just, well, things are slow here, or, you know, they close their doors kind of thing... looking as to why...so instead of the what and the when or where, more asking the whys and hows.¹¹⁵

Students came to realize that there were different perspectives; yet obtaining the German perspective seemed out of reach. Sometimes it appeared that students became resolved to remain at the awareness level. As Ian commented, “Many of them I didn’t understand afterwards. But I don’t know if you can really understand something...I would just accept it. It’s their way, different from mine.”¹¹⁶

When I asked students what type of input would have been helpful with respect to the cultural encounter letters, many suggested writing guiding comments on the cultural encounter letters.¹¹⁷ Ian, for example, suggested “questions to get you to think about it more it, why you think it’s this way, or what causes this.”¹¹⁸ Similarly, Gwen recommended “a suggestion for a different way to look at it...have you considered such and such circumstances or whatever.”¹¹⁹ Finally, Ryan suggested “maybe a little more feedback about why things were the way they were...maybe a comment about...why do you think this is the way it is, where does it show up in the culture?”¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ Post-program individual interview.

¹¹⁵ Post-program individual interview.

¹¹⁶ Post-program individual interview.

¹¹⁷ Dr. Bauer and I agreed prior to the program that only simple and brief comments would be written on students’ cultural encounter letters.

¹¹⁸ Post-program individual interview.

¹¹⁹ Post-program individual interview.

¹²⁰ Post-program individual interview.

Short-term Study Abroad: An Experiment

In conclusion of this chapter, I address how students viewed the Mayen program in terms of their goals and priorities. It is important to remember that for many students the costs associated with studying abroad remain in the forefront of their minds, and influence their day-to-day decisions. Students naturally wanted to “get their money’s worth” by experiencing the program in the way that fit their priorities and desires. Many students indicated that the program was “an experiment” or a “trial run” to determine if they were “cut out” for a longer-term, and possibly more expensive, study abroad program, internship abroad, or even the Peace Corps. For two students, summer was the only time they could go abroad, due to academic and extra-curricular requirements. Therefore, they participated in two back-to-back summer programs in Europe, essentially spending a semester abroad.

Students indicated that they came to Mayen with specific priorities that fit with the idea of the program as an experiment. The opportunity to travel, for example, was a large draw and a priority; students not only experienced Mayen, but also had the opportunity to visit multiple European cities. Moreover, they wanted to see and experience everything that they could, including other parts of Europe. “I’m here to experience Europe and all of the cultural differences throughout Europe, not just Germany,”¹²¹ explained Rachel. Erin said she simply wanted to “experience life outside the U.S.” and that her primary goal was personal: She wanted to speak more in class, since she is usually very quiet, and she felt she had accomplished that goal during the Mayen program.

¹²¹ Focus-group interview in Mayen.

Students indicated a strong desire for accumulating *experiences*; thus, for various reasons, students explained that they did not always want to stop and analyze what they were seeing and experiencing. For Natalie, it wasn't her personality to analyze everything.

A lot of things, like, as I see them, like, I don't, like to analyze things a lot so I'm like, well, I'm in a different place so that's just how they do things here. That's just how, I go, I don't like to think, well, why don't they do it how we do it, because I know that's not the case, because we're a totally different society. People aren't going to act like we do, thank god they don't....I'm so laid back I just let things happen. The cultural experience is there but it doesn't affect me that much, it just kinda sinks in.¹²²

For others, it seemed that during the program, they were too emotionally close to the situation or were simply too exhausted from communicating in German and being constantly on-the-go to pause and analyze their experiences. It also seemed that students did not expect to engage in deep analysis, nor did they want to, as is evidenced in Erin's quote below.

A lot of times I'd be like, it happened, oh, whatever, and not really think about it that much in terms of, wow, how is this culturally different from what I'm used to and how can this change my perceptions of the world and whatever...no. Like, seriously, I did go to learn a little bit but I went more to just get the credits out of the way and to just have the experience of being there. I didn't want to analyze every little thing. I just wanted to be there. This was my first time there. I didn't want to spend my whole time in Europe being like, ok, what does this mean? So I didn't try too hard to analyze.¹²³

Erin highlights the tightrope walk between learning from one's observations and experiences and taking the joy out of cultural discovery through continual analysis. Erin explained that she "did really sit down and try to think about it...it's really interesting to think about" but not until after the program.

¹²² Post-program individual interview.

¹²³ Post-program individual interview.

It takes me a while to sit down and relax. Ok, now it's over, time to break, now look back and think about it. So, like, doing all of this stuff during [the program], I just did it because I had to. But now I would rather do stuff like this and look back and think about it. I think it's hard to talk about or think about stuff while you're in it. You don't have the same perspective. But then, when I look at [this letter], it's interesting to look at, wow, this is what I thought about at that moment in time. Whereas remembering it, I'll probably have a different opinion or remembrance. So there's good and bad parts of trying to analyze it during and after [the program].¹²⁴

Erin addresses the challenge of short-term study abroad. Because the time abroad is relatively brief, programs are often so full of action that there is little time for extended reflection. Erin also notes the difficulty of analyzing an experience in the midst of it, and recognizes that although she would prefer to postpone analysis until after the program, one's perspective is often different once back home.

In light of the themes presented in this chapter regarding how students defined, experienced, and perceived their cultural encounters within the context of their study abroad program, two questions arise. First, what can and should be done to better support students' culture learning before, during, and after a short-term study abroad program? Second, how can culture learning during a short-term study abroad program be conceptualized? The following chapter addresses these questions.

¹²⁴ Post-program individual interview.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how undergraduate students made sense of culture learning during a 6-week language and culture study abroad program in Mayen, Germany. The main research question I sought to answer was, how did students define, experience, and perceive self-identified cultural encounters as they navigated the 2004 short-term Mayen study abroad program? As stated in chapter 1, this study has two goals. The first goal, to document how students defined, experienced, and perceived their self-identified cultural encounters, was met in presenting the findings in the previous chapter. The second goal, to conceptualize culture learning during a short-term study abroad program such as the Mayen program, is addressed in this chapter.

I first summarize the findings presented in chapter 4. Then, I present conclusions garnered from those findings. Following that, I present and discuss my conceptualization of culture learning during short-term study abroad, and make recommendations for practice. Finally, I suggest ideas for further research.

Summary of Findings

Defining and Identifying Cultural Encounters

Students' initial cultural encounters centered primarily on the surprising objective cultural differences that immediately stood out to them. Early on, students perceived an abundance of cultural encounters. Then, when students no longer easily identified such cultural differences, they perceived a lack of cultural encounters. Students' initial self-imposed cultural encounter criteria seemed to become a heuristic against which they compared subsequent cultural encounters, in order to determine viability for letter topics.

Because students were required to write 10 cultural encounter letters during their five weeks in Mayen, they often seemed to cope with the self-imposed implicit criteria by writing about topics that they thought fit the criteria, even though they were not always interested in such topics. Sometimes, however, students, in effect modified the initial criteria when they wrote about instances that were intriguing to them, but that they did not initially consider a cultural encounter.

Factors Affecting Students' Definition and Identification of Cultural Encounters

Students' initial cultural encounter criteria seemed to be informed and reinforced by various factors. First, students' pre-program ideas of culture focused primarily on the objective elements. Second, students' definitions of culture learning centered on ways of accessing and absorbing a new culture. Third, it seemed that students perceived that they should write about the cultural differences they noticed because their instructor frequently asked students to identify and discuss cultural differences in German class. Fourth, students expressed that language learning was more valuable than culture learning.

Cultural Encounters: Host Families and Travel

The Mayen program simultaneously encourages students to travel outside Mayen during the long weekends and touts the host family stay as a way for students to immerse themselves in German language and culture. While students reported appreciating the opportunity to live with a German family, many students did not have the daily contact with their host family that they desired. Very few cultural encounters stemmed from the host family context. Those that did were written primarily by students who lived with very engaging families, who offered students opportunities for participant observation

and conversations about culture-specific topics, and provided students with answers to their cultural questions.

Many cultural encounter letters, however, stemmed from students' weekend travels outside Mayen. Although some students expressed a desire to remain in Mayen on the weekends, in order to spend time with their host families or the local youth they had met during program activities, most opted instead to travel. Travel trumped spending weekends in Mayen because students wanted to maximize their return on their Eurail pass, and students felt they would regret not taking full advantage of the opportunity to visit European cities. Travel also seemed to provide students with enriching opportunities they could not have had in Mayen, such as seeing Germany in different ways due to interactions with, and observations of, people from different parts of Germany and other European countries. Moreover, travel sparked valuable personal reflection, when students encountered language and other difficulties.

Delving Below the Cultural Surface

Some of students' cultural encounter letters illustrate that students grappled with deep and meaningful cultural issues, questioned their cultural interpretations, and considered situations from another cultural perspective. Students' observations also sometimes sparked reflection on their personal and national cultural identity. Additionally, it became apparent from students' comments that writing the cultural encounter letters was a fruitful activity, as it made them more aware of their cultural surroundings. Students also stated that they wanted to delve more deeply into understanding the cultural differences they noticed; however, students often did not know how to do so.

Conclusions

The findings presented in chapter 4 and previously summarized above lead me to several conclusions. First, short-term study abroad programs like the Mayen program can be fertile and productive venues for culture learning; however, culture learning needs to become a priority and as explicit an endeavor as language learning. Second, short-term study abroad should be viewed as a way to not only introduce students to one or more cultures, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as an opportunity to develop culture learning strategies that can prepare students for future intercultural experiences abroad and at home. Third, program components, such as the host family and weekend travel, should be carefully examined in order to determine if and how they support, or possibly hinder, culture learning. Fourth, both students' and faculty leaders' pre-existing ideas about culture and culture learning need to be addressed, explored, and discussed both before and during the program, so that all involved are on the same page and working towards the same goals. Fifth, while students grappled with deeper subjective elements of culture while abroad, they still needed guidance, in the form of culture learning strategies and a vocabulary for investigating, articulating, and processing their observations, experiences, interactions, reactions, and feelings. Sixth, because students possess varying backgrounds, personalities, interests, goals, and previous travel experience, students need to be met where they are in their culture learning journey and given the freedom and encouragement to explore and discuss what is intriguing and meaningful to them.

Conceptualizing Culture Learning During Short-term Study Abroad:

Discussion and Recommendations for Practice

...Study programs [students] attend seem often not to have taken [students' heavy cultural baggage] into serious consideration in their program design. American students abroad need substantial preparation, frequent intervention and informed guidance, and intelligently designed program mechanisms to help them remain focused on the difficult cultural tasks at hand...it is clear at the very least that programs must be structured so as to challenge aggressively certain key cultural assumptions of our students and then work patiently throughout their stay to help coax into being the openness and empathy that are necessary for successful cross-cultural experience. Today, just cutting them loose and hoping for the best generally will not work. (Engle & Engle, 2002, p. 33)

As Engle and Engle and the findings of this study conclude, students need opportunities for and guidance in unpacking their and the host culture's cultural suitcases. Short-term study abroad experiences like the Mayen program seem to be potentially fertile and productive venues for culture learning. However, such opportunities and guidance need to be intentionally and thoughtfully integrated into all aspects of program design and students' daily experience abroad (Kinsella, Smith-Simonet & Tuma, 2002). In this section, I discuss how culture learning can be conceptualized during a short-term experience abroad such as the Mayen program, and make recommendations for practice. First, however, I present the considerations that factored into my ideas, such as the salient aspects of culture learning presented in my theoretical frame, the characteristics of short-term study abroad, what type of guidance the findings of this study indicate that students seem to need most, and the role of the faculty leader(s).

Considerations and Assumptions

Perspectives on Culture Learning

In considering the perspectives on culture learning as presented in my theoretical framework in chapter 2, I suggest that there are three especially salient aspects that aid in conceptualizing culture learning during a short-term study abroad program. First, program participants need repeated direct encounters with the host culture (Kim, 1988), and as Moran (2001) notes, with multiple facets of the host culture's products, practices, and perspectives. Second, it is important that culture-specific learning, which includes language learning, is presented within a framework of culture-general learning, and it is equally paramount, though often overlooked, that students consciously develop strategies to learn how to learn in and from any cultural context (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein & Colby, 2003). Third, encounters with the host culture can and should be actively and explicitly examined (Hess, 1997), and instructors can and should guide their students in doing so (Moran, 2001). The process of examining students' encounters is based on the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984).

Characteristics of Short-term Programs

Short-term programs must be conceived of as focused learning experiences that are facilitated and orchestrated by faculty dealing with limited topics within the target society. (Kinsella, Smith-Simonet, & Tuma, 2002, p. 206)

In chapter 1, I suggested that short-term study abroad is often viewed from a deficit perspective, meaning that such programs are seen for what cannot be accomplished during the program, rather than for the opportunities they can offer. Therefore, in conceptualizing culture learning during short-term study abroad, it is crucial

that such programs not be regarded simply as truncated versions of longer-term programs. Rather, short-term study abroad should be viewed as a wholly different abroad experience, one that possesses unique constraints, opportunities, and goals.

A positive attribute of short-term programs is that because they are often faculty-led, there can be much control over the academic focus and program schedule. Therefore, several types of culture learning activities can be thoughtfully and purposefully designed and integrated into the program structure. Additionally, because faculty leaders teach classes and spend a significant amount of time with program participants, they can systematically guide and direct students through culture learning activities and processing their experiences. As Kinsella, Smith-Simonet, and Tuma (2002) point out, “The strength of any short-term program...lies in the ability of educators to effectively link “doing” and “reflecting,” “experiencing” and “comprehending” within a short timeframe. This is the foundation of experiential learning” (p. 206).

Kinsella, Smith-Simonet, and Tuma also suggest that short-term programs need to define a clear academic focus and goals beyond a vague notion of “exploring culture.” Short-term programs should also delineate a specific plan for students to systematically investigate the chosen academic focus and attaining the stated goals. Amel and Uhrskov (2002) point out the importance of balancing experience with processing. “Too many experiences without a context in which to study and reflect on them can leave students overwhelmed and unsure of just what they are supposed to be learning” (p. 90). What is more, the authors stress the importance of book-ending a short-term study abroad experience with pre- and post-program meetings, so that students can more actively and consciously integrate their abroad experiences into their regular daily lives.

What Students Seem to Need Most

Students exhibit a desire and excitement about learning while abroad; however, they need mediation. First, students need a culture learning framework within which to think, write, and talk about culture and their myriad observations, experiences, interactions, feelings, and reactions. They also need to become aware of and have opportunities to use terminology that can help them attach words to feelings and ideas, to what they sense but have difficulty articulating. Second, once students become familiar with their immediate surroundings, when they can find their way to class, access computers in the internet café, and know where the inexpensive restaurants are, students need direction in how to delve deeper into the host culture. As (Amel & Uhrskov, 2002) note, “Not all students will be anxious to spend every moment exploring the culture. Initially, faculty may have to invite the less-adventurous students to accompany them to a theater performance, museum or meal” (p. 82).

Faculty Leader/Program Considerations

Leading a study abroad program is no easy task; faculty leaders assume a great deal of responsibility when they agree to accompany a group of students abroad. MacNally (2002) identifies the key roles that faculty leaders fulfill as the following: program developer and recruiter, administrator and financial manager, institutional representative, advisor and facilitator, and crisis manager (p. 177-178). Additionally, in Mac Nally’s article, Hoffa notes that the faculty leader “will be asked to be a cultural interpreter and analyst, helping students understand what is going on and how it relates (or doesn’t relate) to things back home” (p. 175, emphasis original).

I suggest that faculty leaders' role as "culture learning guide" should be clearly stated so that faculty can be amply prepared and supported. Kinsella, Smith-Simonet, and Tuma (2002) note that:

...Faculty directors should be aware of how their own behavior is perceived and modeled by the students. In this way the faculty directors of short-term programs must be prepared to serve not only as sources of faculty information and theoretical orientation for students, but must also be able to model the skills necessary to function in a foreign milieu – they must be good examples of cross-cultural adaptability and sensitivity. (p. 208)

Therefore, in addition to assistance with issues such as program logistics or health and safety issues, faculty leaders should be provided with culture learning support throughout the short-term study abroad process, in the form of, for example, one-on-one discussions, pre- and post-program professional development workshops, or providing relevant research articles or descriptions of practice. Faculty leaders should have the opportunity to explore and reflect on their ideas of culture and culture learning, become knowledgeable and comfortable with experiential learning, and voice any concerns they have. Kinsella, Smith-Simonet, & Tuma (2002) suggest that it is the study abroad professional's responsibility to provide such support.

Conceptualization of Culture Learning During Short-term Study Abroad

I suggest that short-term study abroad should be viewed as a focused period of cultural data collection and examination. The goal during such a program should be fostering students' cultural curiosity and igniting their desire to continue exploring, learning, and questioning after the program ends. My conceptualization of culture learning during short-term study abroad comprises the following three components:

- 1) Creating, and intentionally building into the program, specific opportunities for focused observation, interaction, and participant observation.
- 2) Addressing and exploring the dimensions of culture (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, Colby, 2003) in discussions and activities in and outside the classroom.
- 3) Intentionally guiding students through engaging in and reflecting on their observations, experiences, and interactions with objective and subjective elements of another culture.

Culture learning could thus serve as a language and culture program's academic focus and method of learning. To this end, students would examine the products, practices, and perspectives of a specific culture, including the target language, while also becoming aware of, for example, the elements of culture, their personal and national cultural identity, communication styles, and the process of adjusting to another culture. Students would also learn and practice strategies for learning another culture, such as using cultural generalizations, creating and refining a cultural hypothesis, and ethnographic interviewing.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the findings of this study, my recommendations for implementing culture learning into program design and guiding students during a short-term program are as follows:

- 1) Use materials in the *Maximizing Study Abroad: Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use*¹²⁵ guides for program professionals, language instructors, and students. These guides offer numerous culture (and language) learning activities and strategies that can be easily employed in class and as out-of-class investigatory assignments. Additionally, if it is desired that the activities be carried out in the target language, the faculty leader could simply translate the activity handouts in the instructor's guide, rather than having students bring the students' guide, which is in English. Prior to the onset of a study abroad program, specific topics and activities could be selected and purposefully integrated into the program structure. For example, students could pursue an individual cultural project, for which students would conduct an ethnographic interview with a member of their host family.

- 2) Increase opportunities for focused observation, participant observation, and developing relationships with key informants so that students can consistently collect cultural data and test culture learning strategies (using activities in the *Maximizing Study Abroad* guides). Students might, for example, be asked to collect data on touching behavior by observing several locations in town and asking their host family questions. While presenting students with opportunities to chat with native speakers is certainly worthwhile, students in the current study raved about the instances in which they engaged in an activity, such as bowling or

¹²⁵ The guides were created by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota. More information about the guides can be found at <http://www.carla.umn.edu/maxsa/>. See bibliography for citations.

playing soccer with the Gymnasium students. Ideally, students would be able to engage in participant observation through, for example, a community volunteer project or perhaps mini-internships. If opportunities such as these were presented as weekend activities, students might be more inclined to spend a weekend or two in Mayen.

- 3) Enhance the homestay so that it better nurtures students' culture learning. Both the host family and students need pre-placement advising on how to make the most of this living arrangement. For example, host families could be given specific ideas for inexpensive or free activities that would encourage participant observation, such as cooking a meal together, gardening, or joining a family function. To this end, the program could encourage one or two "host family weekends" in which students stay in town in order to undertake an activity with their host family.¹²⁶ Additionally, time could be spent in a pre-program meeting specifically preparing students for the host family stay. Students could be given ideas for initiating and sustaining contact with the host family, and the host family section in the *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Students' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use* could be used.

In my conversations with students who had participated in the Mayen program, I noticed that students had expectations of their homestay that seemed to be based on their personal experience hosting an international student; therefore,

¹²⁶ Granted, finding enough families willing to take students in can be difficult and programs could very well be hesitant to increase what might be perceived as a burden. It might then be advantageous for a program to elicit feedback and ideas from the host families themselves and address the families' specific concerns.

it could be beneficial for students to discuss what they associate with the term “host family” or even “family.” This pre-program conversation could initiate an ongoing investigation of German and U.S. American ideas about being a student or what independence means.

- 4) Prepare students to travel effectively on the weekends. Amel & Uhrskov (2002) note that “because they lack the tools of experienced travelers, students should be required to bring a guidebook of the city or country. Faculty may have students identify a “Top Ten” list of things to see and do in each major city from the guidebooks in advance of departure” (p. 82). Preparing for weekend travel could be actively incorporated into the program. Additionally, students could be asked to practice the culture learning strategies they have learned during their travels to different countries.
- 5) Even though pre-program meetings are recommended, it can be logistically challenging to schedule such meetings in addition to ones required by the study abroad office. Moreover, prior to going abroad, students often lack the concrete experiences with which to recognize the importance of the culture learning concepts that might be presented in such a meeting (Cushner, 2004). Therefore, I recommend addressing the majority of culture learning on-site once students have accumulated observations and experiences.

6) Encourage or require students to write cultural encounter letters. I suggest starting the abroad portion of the program by simply asking students to write about two cultural encounters during the first week. During this time, students should simply observe, get settled in, and have experiences. At the beginning of the second week, students could be asked to list their cultural encounters, perhaps on the chalkboard or on a large piece of paper. Then, students could be guided through a discussion of their cultural encounters by introducing the ice berg analogy of culture and identifying whether their cultural encounter belongs above or below the cultural water line. It should be explained that the cultural encounters students (most likely) chose are typical for people newly arrived in another culture. It should also be explained that while students' cultural encounters are valid, it is what is "below the water" that causes conflict and is the most important to explore. Thus, students would begin to learn culture learning terminology, concepts, and strategies for such exploration.

During the remainder of the program, students could keep an ongoing list of what they deem cultural encounters, and write two full pages about one or two of them per week. Students should be encouraged to write about whatever intrigues them. They should be submitted to an instructor so students are held accountable for completing the assignment, and more importantly so the instructor can provide specific guidance by suggesting a way to collect additional cultural data or offering a different perspective. At some point, students could be introduced to, and encouraged to use, Hess' action-reflection-response strategy in writing about their cultural encounters. So that students can completely express

themselves, I recommend that the cultural encounter letters be written in English.

- 7) Schedule a post-program “re-launching” meeting. As I noted in the findings chapter, students seemed willing, if not interested, in revisiting their cultural encounter letters, and thus also their study abroad experience. With the distance gained from being two months removed from those experiences, students could often see not only the situation they wrote about in a different light, but also the way they reacted to it or wrote about it from a new perspective. At this point, even though the abroad portion of the study abroad program is over, learning has really just begun. As previously mentioned, Kinsella, Smith-Simonet, and Tuma (2002) stress the necessity of such meetings as opportunities to help students link their abroad experience to their daily lives in the U.S.

Therefore, I recommend scheduling a post-program get-together as a component of the study abroad program. Rather than merely a re-entry meeting, I propose viewing such a get-together as an opportunity to prepare to “re-launch” students into future opportunities for culture learning at home and abroad. To give this meeting purpose and validity, students could be asked to select their best and worst cultural encounter letter and be prepared to discuss their impressions of and reactions to these letters. Students could also discuss which culture learning strategies they preferred using, how they might use them in their daily lives, and highlight the culture-specific topics they would like to know more about. I call this meeting a “re-launch” because students are not merely re-entering their home culture when they return from a study abroad experience. Rather, students are

going to have intercultural interactions, and presumably go abroad again one or more times in their life. Therefore, instead of waiting until their next study abroad program and pre-departure orientation, students should be directed in reflecting and planning ahead, even if they do not immediately recognize the importance or benefits. Moreover, it is important to point out to students that culture learning does not begin when they step off the plane in another country and end when they return home.

Suggestions for Further Research

First and foremost, additional research on all aspects of the myriad types of short-term study abroad experiences is greatly needed. However, following are research areas stemming from this dissertation that I see as potentially fruitful avenues for continued exploration.

- 1) What does it mean to be a “good” or “successful” study abroad participant? How would students, faculty leaders, local instructors, and study abroad professionals answer this question?
- 2) What are faculty leaders’ concerns regarding culture learning during a short-term program? How much and what types of culture learning support do faculty leaders want?
- 3) Since independent travel is often the priority of study abroad students, and can constitute a portion of a study abroad program, it could be fruitful to build on Gmelch (1997) and further explore students’ experiences and perceptions in this

area. What are students' travel goals? How do they decide where to travel and with whom? What factors might encourage students to remain in their study abroad location? How do they describe their travel experiences?

- 4) What are faculty leaders' and study abroad program professionals' perceptions of students' serendipitous travels?
- 5) The Center for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota has investigated students' use and views of the *Maximizing Study Abroad: Students' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use* during semester programs (Cohen, Paige, Shively, Emert, and Hoff, 2005). It would be beneficial if this guide could also be explored in the context of short-term study abroad.

Conclusion

The students in this study raved about their experiences abroad. When I met with them a few months after the program ended, students repeatedly exclaimed that studying in Mayen was the best decision they could have made. Many were already dreaming about or even planning their next international adventure. Regardless whether those future international adventures materialize into another study abroad program, an international work experience, a family vacation, international friendships, or simply receiving tech support from someone in another country, students need and deserve the opportunity to learn how to be culture learners. Short-term study abroad can be an excellent means to make this happen.

APPENDIX A

Consent Form

Purpose

To study students' perceptions of the short-term "German Language and Culture in Mayen" study abroad program.

Estimate of Subject's Time

Students will be asked to complete three questionnaires (one before, one during, and one after the program). Each questionnaire should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. Students will also be asked to participate in individual post-program interviews in September. These interviews will last about an hour.

Data Collection

I would like to have access to the following program required documents:

- Letter to host family
- Email introduction
- "Dear Dr. Bauer" Letters
- Journals written for German class

I will obtain these documents from Dr. Bauer immediately after he collects them from students. I will photocopy the documents and return them promptly. I will not see or have access to students' grades or any instructor comments regarding these documents.

Voluntary Participation

Although I hope you will choose to participate in my study, your participation is completely voluntary. Declining to participate will not adversely affect your participation in this, or any other, study abroad program. If you change your mind about participating at any time, you need not continue. If at any time there are any questions you wish not to answer for any reason, please feel free not to answer them.

Audio Taping

In order improve accuracy, I prefer to audio tape interviews in addition to taking hand-written notes. Before the interview, I will prominently display the tape recorder and microphone and state that I would like to record the interview. The audio tapes will be used only by me for the purposes of transcribing the interviews. I plan to keep the audio tapes until I complete my dissertation, at which time I will destroy all audio tapes.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

All information you provide for this study will be kept confidential. I would like you to create your own pseudonym that I will use when writing up the results of this research. If you do not write down a pseudonym on the reverse side of this consent form, I will create one for you. No identifying information about you will be reported, even if you include identifying statements (e.g. I was born in Flint, MI on November 11, 1981.) Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Compensation

Your participation in this study is valuable and voluntary. Therefore, all students who participate in this study will receive a “Scrapbook DVD” containing all of the photos I take during the Mayen program. Students are welcome to provide me with additional photos, postcards, or other memorabilia that they would like included. Additionally, I will host a reunion party for all students in September.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the investigators (Dr. Patricia Paulsell, Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Letters, 200 Linton Hall, 517-355-5229, paulsell@msu.edu OR Cate Brubaker, Doctoral Candidate, Linguistics & Languages (German), catejohn@msu.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – anonymously, if you wish – Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) by phone: (517)355-2180, fax: (517)432-4503, e-mail: ucrihs@msu.edu, or regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

1. Please mark

_____ YES, if you want to participate in the study.

_____ NO, if you do not want to participate in the study.

2. Please mark

_____ YES, if you consent to being audio taped during the post-program interview.

_____ NO, if you do not consent to being audio taped during the post-program interview.

3. Print name: _____

4. Sign name: _____

5. Print pseudonym: _____

6. Date: _____

7. Email Address: _____

APPENDIX B

German Language and Culture in Mayen Study Abroad Program

Student Questionnaire # 1

I. Personal Information

Name: _____

Age: _____ Hometown/state: _____

E-mail address: _____ G.P.A. _____

Circle one: *Male Female* Circle one: *Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Other*

Major(s): _____ Minor(s): _____

II. Language Learning Background

1. If you grew up speaking or hearing another language(s) besides English, please list below.

2. Please list all language(s) that you learned in elementary, middle, and high school. Please list the grade(s) in which you learned the language(s).

Example: Spanish – 6-8th grade; German 9-12th grade

3. Please list all language(s) that you have learned in college. Please list how many semesters you learned the language(s).

Example: French – 2 semesters; Japanese – 4 semesters

4. How many German language classes have you taken in college? _____
5. How many German literature/culture classes have you taken in college? _____
6. How many German linguistics classes have you taken in college? _____
7. How many business German classes have you taken in college? _____
8. How many Anthropology class have you taken in college? _____
9. How many Intercultural Communication classes have you taken in college? _____

III. Travel Experience. Please list all of your previous overseas travel experiences.

<u>Country(ies) visited</u>	<u>Purpose of travel</u>	<u>Duration</u>

IV. Study Abroad Preparation.

1. Have you taken AL 200 at MSU? *Circle one:* YES NO
2. Have you taken any study abroad preparation courses? *Circle one:* YES NO
 - a. If yes, please give the name and a brief description of the course:

3. Did you attend the general study abroad orientation at MSU? *Circle one:* YES NO

4. Did you attend the “Women Abroad” orientation at MSU? *Circle one:* YES NO

5. If not an MSU student, please explain any additional study abroad related preparation meetings or orientations that you had.

V. About the Mayen Program.

1. What factors led you to choose to study abroad in Germany?
2. What factors led you to choose the Mayen program over other short-term study abroad options?
3. Are you participating in any other study abroad programs after Mayen? If yes, please describe the program. If not, do you think you like to participate in another study abroad program in the future? Why or why not?
4. Please rank the following in order of importance for being able to learn German **language** in Mayen.
 - _____ Spending free-time with other Mayen program participants
 - _____ Program-sponsored group fieldtrips outside Mayen
 - _____ Spending time alone
 - _____ Living with a German host family
 - _____ Program-sponsored group activities in Mayen
 - _____ German class with a native English-speaking German instructor
 - _____ Traveling on the weekends to locations outside of Mayen
 - _____ German class with a native German-speaking instructor
 - _____ Other (please explain)

5. Please rank the following in order of importance for being able to learn German **culture** in Mayen.

- _____ Spending free-time with other Mayen program participants
- _____ Program-sponsored group fieldtrips outside Mayen
- _____ Spending time alone
- _____ Living with a German host family
- _____ Program-sponsored group activities in Mayen
- _____ German class with a native English-speaking German instructor
- _____ Traveling on the weekends to locations outside of Mayen
- _____ German class with a native German-speaking instructor
- _____ Other (please explain)

6. How do you define culture?

7. What or who has influenced and developed your definition of culture?

8. What strategies will you use to maximize **language** learning while abroad?

9. What strategies will you use to maximize **culture** learning while abroad?

APPENDIX C

German Language and Culture in Mayen Study Abroad Program

Student Questionnaire # 2

Name: _____

Host family: _____

1. Please rank the following in order of importance for being able to learn German **language** in Mayen.

- _____ Traveling on the weekends to locations outside of Mayen
- _____ Program-sponsored group activities in Mayen
- _____ German class with a native German-speaking instructor
- _____ Spending time alone
- _____ Living with a German host family
- _____ Spending free-time with other Mayen program participants
- _____ German class with a native English-speaking German instructor
- _____ Program-sponsored group fieldtrips outside Mayen
- _____ Other (please explain)

2. Please rank the following in order of importance for being able to learn German **culture** in Mayen.

- _____ Traveling on the weekends to locations outside of Mayen
- _____ Program-sponsored group activities in Mayen
- _____ German class with a native German-speaking instructor
- _____ Spending time alone
- _____ Living with a German host family
- _____ Spending free-time with other Mayen program participants
- _____ German class with a native English-speaking German instructor
- _____ Program-sponsored group fieldtrips outside Mayen
- _____ Other (please explain)

3. What strategies did you use to maximize **language** learning while abroad? Please explain how these strategies worked.

4. What strategies did you use to maximize **culture** learning while abroad? Please explain how these strategies worked.

5. How do you define culture?

6. How has your definition of culture changed since being abroad? What or who has influenced your definition of culture?

7. What advice would you give to future study abroad students regarding language and culture learning while abroad?

8. Would you like to participate in another study abroad program?

Circle one: YES NO

a. If **no**, why not?

b. If **yes**, for how long (winter break, summer, semester, academic year)?

d. In which country would you want to study abroad?

e. What would you want to do, learn or experience that you didn't during the Mayen program?

APPENDIX D

German Language and Culture in Mayen Study Abroad Program

Student Questionnaire # 3

Name: _____

Current university class standing: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Other

1. Please rank the following in order of importance for being able to learn German **language** in Mayen.

- _____ German class with a native German-speaking instructor
- _____ Spending free-time with other Mayen program participants
- _____ Living with a German host family
- _____ Traveling on the weekends to locations outside of Mayen
- _____ German class with a native English-speaking German instructor
- _____ Program-sponsored group activities in Mayen
- _____ Spending time alone
- _____ Program-sponsored group fieldtrips outside Mayen
- _____ Other (please explain)

2. Please rank the following in order of importance for being able to learn German **culture** in Mayen.

- _____ German class with a native German-speaking instructor
- _____ Spending free-time with other Mayen program participants
- _____ Living with a German host family
- _____ Traveling on the weekends to locations outside of Mayen
- _____ German class with a native English-speaking German instructor
- _____ Program-sponsored group activities in Mayen
- _____ Spending time alone
- _____ Program-sponsored group fieldtrips outside Mayen
- _____ Other (please explain)

3. How do you define culture?

4. How has your definition of culture changed since returning from Germany? What or who has influenced your definition of culture?

5. What **language** learning strategies would you recommend to students going to Mayen next year?

6. What **culture** learning strategies would you recommend to students going to Mayen next year?

7. Would you like to participate in another study abroad program? *Circle one:* YES

NO

a. If **no**, why not?

b. If **yes**, for how long (winter break, summer, semester, academic year)?

d. In which country would you want to study abroad?

e. What would you want to do, learn or experience that you didn't during the Mayen program? Why?

APPENDIX E

Cultural Encounter Letter Assignment Handout

“Dear Dr. Bauer” Letter Writing Assignment:

The journal you write for class gives you the opportunity to practice your German by writing about your daily experiences abroad. Students sometimes find, however, that they cannot express themselves as much as they wish they could in German. Therefore, each week I would like for you to write two “Dear Dr. Bauer” letters in English. Since we are in Mayen for five weeks, you are expected to write 10 letters total. You will not receive a grade for these letters, but you will receive credit for each letter you write. One letter is due on Monday and the second on Thursday of each week.

Please begin each letter with the sentence in italics below. What you write after that is up to you! Please write at least one full average-sized page (front) and no more than two pages (front and back).

Dear Dr. Bauer,

I'd like to tell you about a cultural encounter (experience) I had this week.

APPENDIX F

Focus Group Interview (in Mayen) Protocol

(Note: The questions below were derived from topics students addressed in the brief mini-interviews, in which I simply asked students to tell me how they went about choosing cultural encounters to write their letters about. I used the following questions as prompts; however, I did not ask them exactly as they are written here, nor did I ask them in the same way or order with each interview.)

- 1) How did you interpret the “Dear Dr. Bauer” assignment?
- 2) What experiences or encounters did you consider writing about? Why did you choose not to write about them?
- 3) If you hang out with other students on the program, why do you choose to do this?
- 4) Does (how) this influence your encounters and experiences in Germany?
- 5) Looking back on the past four weeks, is there anything you would now do differently? Is there anything that you now see or think differently about?
- 6) Tell me about your weekend travel. What role does it play for you in the program and in your overall experience on the program?
- 7) Did you have any expectations about the types of “cultural” or “linguistic” experiences you thought you’d have?

APPENDIX G

Host Family Survey

Please answer the following questions (on the other side of the sheet or on your own paper) as honestly as possible – nobody but me will read them. Please write as much as you'd like!

- 1) Describe the members of your family to me – include their age, type of school they attend, occupation, and any other information you deem relevant.
- 2) Describe your living situation to me – where is your bathroom located? Do you share a bathroom? Do you have your own kitchen or do you use the host family's? Do you have your own entrance? Does the family buy you food or cook you dinner? Do you laundry? Etc.
- 3) Describe the actual house you are staying in (or draw a picture) – what does it look like on the outside and inside?
- 4) Describe where and with whom you eat breakfast – do you make it yourself? Do you eat with your host family?
- 5) How often do you interact with your host family? Do you tend to speak German or English? Describe typical interactions with your family.
- 6) What do you like most and least about your host family set-up?
- 7) What, if anything, would you change about your host family situation?
- 8) Is there any other information you'd like to share?

Thank you for taking time to answer these questions!

APPENDIX H

Post-program Individual Semi-Structured Interview Question Protocol

(Note: I used these questions as prompts; however, I did not ask them exactly as they are written here, nor did I ask them in the same way or order with each interview.)

First: Hand student photocopied letters and ask "Please read through your "Dear Dr. Bauer" letter(s)."

- 1) What are your initial reactions to re-reading your letters?
- 2) Can you explain why you chose to write about this/these topics over other topics you might have considered? What other topics did you consider writing about but decided against?
- 3) Looking back now, do you think the topics you wrote about are (still) worthwhile topics – or do you think you would choose other topics?
- 4) In your opinion, how did your letters change over the course of the program?
- 5) Can you describe your process of trying to interpret what you observed / noticed / the situation? Did you take steps to inform yourself about...?
- 6) How effective do you feel you were in interpreting or analyzing the event / situation / what you observed?
- 7) Have you followed up on this topic, either on purpose or inadvertently, in any way or learned anything new about it?
- 8) (How) would you interpret anything differently now? Why?
- 9) If you were to do the program again, how do you think you could be even more effective in interpreting / analyzing / understanding a situation / event / observation such as this?
- 10) Do you think the process of having to write down the encounter helped you analyze and interpret the encounter in any way? How?

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