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Digital Cocoons and the Raw Abroad

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Students should leave cell phone habits home when going abroad (essay)

Submitted by George Greenia and Jacob H. Rooksby on April 15, 2016 - 3:00am
The Digital Student

Remember the thin, blank blue sheets we used to buy in foreign post offices? The rectangle already had wing panels to fold in and was appropriately stamped “Aérogramme” on the outside. For a flat rate, the traveler could write a letter home, seal the flaps over the inner rectangle and drop it in the mail. It weighed next to nothing and marked us as more than postcard tourists if less than natives. We sometimes got home before our letters arrived.

This is not a nostalgia essay.

Today’s study abroad industry thrusts more than 300,000 ^[1] American students onto planes heading to industrialized nations and occasionally to the safer enclaves of less prosperous ones. Engaging with foreign languages and cultures is the announced goal, with English-speaking countries the preferred destinations of the cautious. This may be the first trip abroad for some American college students or even their first time on an airplane. Others are seasoned travelers, if still culturally inexperienced.

They are all festooned with multiple digital devices.

Today’s study abroad explorers may leave their home country but not leave home at all. Thanks to cheap international data plans and smartphones in their pockets, millennial Americans seldom say goodbye to familiar friends, family and online comforts as they set out to experience life in a different country. Can a digital native ever go native?

The implied comfort of a digital cocoon is what entices some students to undertake the foreign travel they never would have considered half a generation ago. And the reassurance is not just implied. Some study abroad offices issue cheap flip phones purchased in country so students can be in constant contact with their academic and legal guardians. Professors preload travel instructions and course materials onto websites. If those sites go down, study abroad courses often grind to a halt.

Long forgotten are the exertions of making international calls by pay phone and calling cards -- not to mention those cheap blue Aérogramme sheets. Liability considerations control many aspects of institution-sponsored foreign travel. Insistence on continuous digital access is the safety net for a large part of the organizers’ legal concerns. In some programs, refusing to carry a charged cell phone is a scoldable offense.

Don’t blame the college, either. Today’s helicopter parents are much more likely to support their children’s desire to spend a summer or semester abroad if they are ensured constant connectivity

via smartphones and tablets. They know their son or daughter will forget to make a call, but Mom and Dad will refuse to underwrite a trip if their kids cannot take a call, or at least be geolocated.

And today's millennials are adept social engineers, having successfully retrofitted their parents to be as needy about technology as they are. Even Grandma wants to read the blog about Florence, Brisbane or Calcutta -- and is planning on getting a virtual tour from her intrepid young traveler once the program is over.

Yet we're starting to realize that wearing a digital helmet undermines precisely the reasons we take students to foreign places in the first place. They're still texting the same circle of American friends, still posting to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. They may superficially engage with the culture that surrounds them, glancing at surfaces, wincing at strange foods, seeing crowds of natives and talking about them online. The problem is not just one of forging genuine connection, although lingering in an English digital environment is certainly a major obstacle to linguistic and cultural immersion.

Technology closes doors for our students as much as it opens them. It's armor you can't take off. When we walk streets without purpose, loiter in parks and open spaces, sit and watch a new world go by in cafes and restaurants that lack the trappings of home -- these are the experiences that today's digital adepts are missing. They arrive in geographically distant places tethered to intractable habits involving their devices. Why try to tap into the pulse of a foreign city when familiar friends and entertainment are only a finger tap away?

Our students' addiction to the virtual undercuts the personal growth that comes from reflection and even loneliness. Studying abroad is valuable precisely because of the discomforts students confront in foreign environments that lead to lasting insights into the daily cadences of life in new places. Touch and taste, leisure and loneliness, fatigue and friendship -- each is lived in the flesh, not in pixels.

Formative moments shaped by solitude, chance, serendipity and wonder risk being lost when social media provide a plasticized sense of safety. Unwilling to drop their digital routines, or at least minimize use of their devices, students miss out on opportunities that come from living in an environment not curated by technology. The untechnologized undergrads of yesteryear used to ask a local to take their photograph. Why reach out to a fellow human when a selfie stick does its own reaching?

Foreign experiences increasingly are measured in likes rather than nondigital memories. Awareness of the very fragility of memory is a strange benefit of travel abroad. Emerging in its place is a worrisome form of drive-by tourism often marked by narcissism, voyeurism and guarded detachment.

An enduring attribute of foreign study is the very quality that ties it to liberal education: the ability to broaden perspectives through cultivating lifelong learning. Curiosity about culture and difference requires a commitment to immersion and the deep changes that can come from a disconnection from the familiar. We need to urge our students to turn off their devices -- and to keep them off. We must show them that a digital detox while abroad will lead to richer, more lasting experiences. To truly leave home requires leaving one's digital self behind.

How to get our students to take off their digital helmets? Denying all access would be impractical, impermissible and perhaps emotionally destabilizing. Digital junkies can't go cold turkey, and neither can their equally addicted parents.

But how about requiring our students to carry a phone but promise not to consult it more than once a day? We might reward them for the fewest log-ins on social media or craft for them a site-specific scavenger hunt of microlocations (the sheep pasture closest to the cathedral) and cultural

experiences (a dinner of only Chinese insect snacks) that could never be Googled onto a checklist. Those blue airmail sheets have morphed into blogs and online journals that can be guided writing exercises that we ask undergraduates to start in hard copy.

Restoring the “raw abroad” can provide the jolting strangeness we long for our students to have. And that means urging that the digital visor be lifted up out of sight.

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