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Psychology Beyond Borders: An International Program at Oxford University

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This brief article describes my recent U.S. study-abroad courses at Oxford University, and their roots in my cross-disciplinary "Common Experience" approach to teaching.

The Common Experience

As a scholar long committed to interdisciplinary inquiry (an interdisciplinary doctorate at Boston University, with Sigmund Koch and Elie Wiesel, among others), I have always challenged students to learn to see a given phenomenon through multiple lenses. In large introductory classes (n = 400), for example, I adopted the technique of introducing each week's material by way of a brief, customized video of the life and work of an intellectual beyond psychology—Stephen Hawking, Maya Angelou, Elie Wiesel, Richard Dawkins—and challenged students to connect the topic d'jour to that "visiting" scholar's lifework. Witnessing the power of this cross-disciplinary fertilization, I took special note of how

many students (yes, even freshmen) made a point of asking: "I loved hearing [author/scholar X]; what book of theirs should I read to learn more?" In response, I developed a reading list cross-referenced to my virtual scholars program, and then hit upon the notion of having the entire university and surrounding community engage in a year-long, thematic conversation framed by a scholar's life and work ("Common Experience," Frost, 2009). I developed the model at Texas State University, where the Common Experience is approaching its 15th year, brought it to San Diego State University, about to celebrate its 10th year, and assisted a number of other colleges and universities in developing similar programs.

But there was another historical event that gave rise to the Common Experience model, and to the birth of a special interdisciplinary program located at Oxford University, and it occurred on a short-term study abroad trip, University of Canterbury–Kent. In this particular year, 2002, I had worked with faculty members teaching courses other than psychology to embed an original work of Freud into their courses (English, Philosophy, History), and to connect (as possible) to the Religion-Science dialectic that framed my course. The results were telling, students not even in the same courses where debating Freud along a number of dimensions well beyond the classroom: on the trains, in the pubs, in the residential hall. Several students, near the end of the program, came to me and complained that they were "left out" of these conversations beyond the classroom, because their particular courses did not include a common reading.

I began sketching a new program that would feature the crossing of geographical boundaries ("study abroad"), the crossing of disciplinary boundaries, the intentional embedding of common reading across all courses offered, and the infusion of original works—and wherever possible, the author of that work. The goal was an educational experience that would encourage the making of complex, interdisciplinary connections; in-depth critical thinking; intentionally designed experiential excursions; and a rekindling of the value of int-

electual dialogue, i.e., seminar style, tutorial education, for undergraduate students.

The Oxford Experience

The Oxford program is built around a carefully designed interdisciplinary course, "Religion, Science and the Quest for Meaning." This features eight to ten primary texts, an intentional crossing of disciplinary boundaries, and team-taught, seminar-style pedagogy (see <https://oakland.edu/ais/resources/syllabi/> for an earlier rendition of the syllabus). We also created an additional course, "Literature, Art, and the Quest for Meaning," which required five to six primary texts, as well as poetry, films, art, and cultural experiences. By integrating the works of Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis into each course, the two courses richly cohere.

Given the immense reading load, we actually begin the courses six months before the summer experience: Students enroll by October of the prior year, participate in a seminar the following spring semester, and attend scholarly lectures available regionally that connect to course content. The latter, for example, have included lectures/discussion with such notables as (the late) Elie Wiesel, Paul Farmer, Frans de Waal, Peter Singer, Paul Bloom, and Richard Dawkins. This extended scheduling ensures that students are steeped in the academic content long before their arrival at St. Hilda's College, Oxford. Upon arrival, the program is unremittingly intense: 24/7, for just over three weeks, with seminars, excursions, guest lecturers, and films. Past programs have featured seminar discussions of Richard Dawkins's *The Devil's Chaplain*, led by Richard Dawkins; a theological response to Dawkins from Richard Swinburne and Alasdair McGrath; lectures on C. S. Lewis from Walter Hooper; an analysis of the meanings of nonverbal communication by Peter Collett; a discussion of a new frame from which to view Michael Ward's *The Narnia Code* by Michael Ward, and talks by additional Oxford dons who vary year to year.

Because the human response to mortality has always been a central theme, the addition of Sheldon Solomon, renowned co-originator of Terror Management Theory

(TMT), to the program's team teaching faculty has contributed greatly to the depth of the program. And at the Oxford end, participation by Peter Hampson and Jonathon Jong has also enriched the program.

The richness of the seminars also stems from an array of connected experiences: taking private, sunrise/sunset tours of Stonehenge (connected to readings exploring the "meaning" of Stonehenge), standing in the yard of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (like the *Groundlings* in the early seventeenth century) for a play connected to the course (play is not only read by students, but they act out scenes from the play prior to the Globe experience), visiting museums, and experiencing the cities and architecture of Oxford and London. One year, for instance, the C.S. Lewis Symposium in Oxford featured as the capstone event a staged version of Mark St. Germain's *Freud's Last Session*, and our students were invited to participate. The event proved to be a most appropriate, and powerful, culminating experience to that year's Oxford program.

Conclusion

In summary, "The Oxford Experience" program features crossing geographical boundaries ("study abroad"), crossing disciplinary boundaries, embedding common reading across courses, infusing original works—and wherever possible, authors of those works—into the program, team-taught and tutorial style pedagogy, and experiential excursions connected to course content. The goal is to create the possibility for life-changing educational experiences (see Kuh, 2008), which actually promote lifelong learning. I cover formal assessment of study abroad elsewhere (Frost, Hulsey, & Sabol, 2013; see also Forum 2015). For here, let me conclude with this: Having designed and led numerous study abroad programs for 15 years (Canterbury, Oxford, Mexico, Tanzania), and engaged in international teaching in settings as diverse as Romania (Fulbright Scholar) and Morocco, my colleagues and I have seen firsthand both the quantity of transformations (percentage of participating students transformed) and the quality of transformation (the deep impact of these

programs) ensuing from these programs. With over three decades in higher education, I can state that this intentionally crafted program has, more than anything else in which I have been involved, prepared students for life as a voyage of discovery—one that requires new eyes through which to see.

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For photos from the Oxford experience:

- <https://goo.gl/photos/T3ESx1BKmoNRZ54D6>
<https://goo.gl/photos/cYHwdZCcTuj0MWzA6>
<https://goo.gl/photos/fkk1sKrhDT6DGhEZA>

Sample syllabi:

- <https://www.oakland.edu/ais/resources/syllabi/>
https://www.oakland.edu/Assets/upload/docs/AIS/Syllabi/Frost_Syllabus.pdf



At Cambridge University (excursion to) in 2002, Stephen Hawking greets Professor Frost's class

Teaching Psychology in Italy: The Importance of Intercultural Psychology

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It is a great pleasure for us to write for the Teaching International Psychology column because this is a good opportunity to share our experiences with other scholars and practitioners. We graduated and work in Italy at the University of Palermo which was established in 1806. The University of Palermo was the third university to create the degree of Psychology in Italy (after Padua and Rome). In Italy most of the degrees are organized following a 3+2 years model: there is a bachelor-level degree (3 years) and a master-level degree (2 years). At the University of Palermo there is a bachelor degree in Psychology called "Psychological Sciences and Techniques" and three related master degrees, one in Clinical

Psychology, one in Life Span Psychology, and one in Social and Organizational Psychology. We teach two courses in the Master Degree in Life Span Psychology: Methods of Interventions in Multicultural Contexts and Design of Psychological and Educational Interventions. In particular, Cristiano Inguglia is an assistant professor who is the chair of both courses, while Pasquale Musso leads workshops within these courses. Both classes have a practical approach that consists of applying the theoretical principles of intercultural, developmental and educational psychology in order to plan psychosocial interventions in different kinds of contexts (e.g., schools, neighborhoods, families, hospitals, enterprises, and so on). In the following sections, we will discuss the importance of dealing with these topics in Italy.

Interventions in Multicultural Contexts

Our university is located in Sicily, an island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Due to the geographical position close to both African and Middle-Eastern countries, there has been frequent migration flow to Sicily over the last several years. Sicily is becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse as a result. This situation results in a patchwork of people presenting a rich variation of cultures and religions who are seeking to find new ways of sharing the same living space. Intercultural dialogue and active citizenship are crucial factors in constructing mutual intercultural contexts in which diversity is a resource for both for host and immigrant community.

Psychology can effectively contribute to an understanding of factors promoting personal and societal development in such contexts (Berry, 2005, 2013). For instance, psychological science can improve our knowledge of the psychosocial processes underlying the adaptation of minority groups. It also helps us understand the factors that affect the quality of intercultural relations in plural societies in order to prevent ethnic conflicts and violence. Moreover, this knowledge needs to be used to design evidence-based intervention programs and policies aimed at fostering psychological well-being and active citizenship among minority and majority

groups, thereby reducing perceived discrimination and improving the quality of intercultural dialogue.

Starting from these considerations, we try to provide our students with knowledge about some key psychological concepts in this field such as acculturation, ethnic identity, ethnic socialization, perceived discrimination, multicultural ideology, tolerance, ethnic attitudes, and acculturation expectations. Some contents of our lectures are also based on our own research, mostly focused on adolescents and emerging adults living in Sicily, both Italians and Tunisians (e.g., Inguglia & Musso, 2015; Musso, Inguglia, & Lo Coco, 2015). Also, we try to train students using some of the best known methods to reduce prejudice and foster intercultural dialogue based on contact, integration and multicultural hypotheses, such as cooperative learning or bicultural education. In doing so, we employ a blended methodology by integrating traditional lectures (e.g., via slide presentations) and active methods, such as games, role-playing, and group discussions. Finally, we organize field trips to let the students become more familiar with local, regional, and national NGOs working in this field.

Design of Psychological and Educational Interventions

Another important competence for future psychologists is the ability to design and write effective projects in order to apply for funding. In Italy there are increasing unemployment rates with regard to professions in the psychology field. This is probably due to the general crisis of the labor market, along with the large number of psychologists in Italy, which number between 1/3 and 1/4 of the total number of European psychologists (Lunt, Peirò, Poortinga, & Roe, 2015). In this context, being able to design effective projects is a fundamental competence for psychologists to create new job opportunities. Furthermore, in the last years in Italy less and less money has been allocated for ordinary welfare and socio-educational policies, thus there is a need to write projects to answer new social and psychological priorities related to the general well-being of the members of our society.

Teaching students to design and write good projects is also important because it allows them to develop key competences needed to be a psychologist in Europe according to EuroPsy, the European Certificate in Psychology in which the European Standard for this profession is outlined. For instance, among these competences are the ability to define goals of the service that will be provided, the ability to assess individuals, groups and organizations, the ability to identify, prepare and carry out interventions which are appropriate for reaching goals, using the results of assessment, and development of activities. All these abilities can be trained and developed by teaching students to design and write effective projects. How do we teach this topic? We follow a very practical approach. After having shared guidelines and a common outline, we encourage our students to feel free to choose a field of intervention of interest and to apply the knowledge they have already gained in order to answer important social and psychological concerns in that field. Thus, students are organized in small groups (2-3 persons) and they design and write their own project in a collaborative way. Moreover, we promote the awareness of best practices in different contexts (e.g., schools, neighborhoods, families, etc.) and fields (e.g., prevention of drop-out, prevention of post-partum depression, citizenship education, etc.), through case studies and lectures by representatives of the organizations that developed these projects. Finally, we promote practice exercises aimed at enhancing students' knowledge of calls for projects and of sources of funding available for psychologists and social scientists.

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