

# 11

## **Zooming to Indonesia: Cultural Exchange Without Study Abroad**

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At the end of a challenging semester in which the COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of my summer study abroad program in Indonesia, I was gratified to hear a student reflect in class on the results of an online collaboration I had hastily developed to stand in the place of travel. She noted that, although she was extremely disappointed she could not go to Indonesia, she had nonetheless accomplished “more of what study abroad is really about” through our online exchange than when she actually studied abroad in Europe the previous year. She described her time there as “very much like you’re in a museum, and you’re walking around as a spectator . . . you trap yourself in a bubble and don’t even talk to locals, [coming] back with evidence of travel, not immersion.” In this online exchange, she instead spent hours on Zoom delving into personal, cultural, and academic topics with Indonesian peers from diverse backgrounds. Based on their reflection work, she and others—both in the US class and in Indonesia—had come away with a deeper understanding of differences and commonalities between national and regional culture both at home and abroad.

How were we able to achieve these outcomes, given that the abroad portion of the program was canceled? This chapter focuses on two related goals: first, discussing the development of a series of online cultural exchange assignments completed by a class of students at the University of Puget Sound (UPS) and a distributed group of Indonesian students from the Young Southeast Asian Leaders



Figure 1: Balinese participant Lisa Purwanti introduces herself in a short video posted to the program's social media group.

Initiative (YSEALI) who were to have participated jointly in the abroad portion of this embedded cultural exchange program. Second, it discusses the pedagogical philosophy behind the assignments, their relationship to the historical use of ethnographic methods as an avenue toward experiential learning in study abroad, and what exercises like this mean for post-pandemic study abroad, particularly in Asia.<sup>1</sup> The assignments discussed, their autoethnographic framework, and the surrounding pedagogical approach may be of use to any college or high school instructor with connections to facilitate the involvement of Asian peers in an online cultural exchange program.

## Background

Every year or two, I conduct short-term study abroad programs in Indonesia, mobilizing what I call the “extended semester” model of embedding the time

abroad within the rigors of semester-long, on-campus preparation and post-travel reflection.<sup>2</sup> As part of my research into American study abroad practice and a growing awareness of the ways international education can re/produce colonial power relations, I have worked to shift the balance of pedagogical authority on the programs, chiefly through involving Indonesian students and academics.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to partnerships with the Henry Luce Foundation and the US Embassy in Jakarta (who administer the YSEALI program), my last two programs have focused on providing a forum for Indonesian and American students to work collaboratively, focusing on cross-cultural dialogue and relationship-building, and with a goal of providing similar benefits for all involved. I have been able to identify and enroll Indonesian students from across that diverse country and bring them into conversation with UPS students, in and around Atma-Jaya University in Yogyakarta. To foster fluent communication, and because Indonesian language study at UPS has been limited, we have prioritized English language skills in our recruiting of Indonesian participants, alongside regional and ethnic diversity and low-income applicants. This is a less than ideal solution to a difficult problem, as I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> but it is the best we have been able to devise given our financial and institutional constraints.

In Yogyakarta, YSEALI and UPS students share rooms and attend the same class sessions but spend most of their time in small groups conducting ethnographic activities that encourage them to work together, exploring anthropological ideas from the classroom through real-world engagements, observations, interviews, and service. The program is built around best practices in experiential learning abroad, which draw on Kolb's four stage model,<sup>5</sup> as well as the interventions highlighted in Bennett and Hammer's work on intercultural competence.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, I argue that these approaches are fixed on a mid-century vision of anthropology, borrowing much of its ethnographic tool kit while largely avoiding the lessons of the "crisis of representation" that reshaped the discipline in the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> At that time, anthropologists (largely from wealthy, Western countries) began to reflect on their own authority to represent the Global South. Among other things, this led to a shift toward collaborative ethnography, through which "culture" is posited as a product of interaction rather than a repository of information prime for extraction.<sup>8</sup> In this spirit, I have developed my abroad programs to focus on cultural exchange and collaboration between UPS and YSEALI students, using assignments intended to be equally beneficial for all involved.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, my 2020 program was canceled halfway through its spring semester preparatory course. Students were disappointed, as one would expect, and many have expressed hope that, despite differing schedules, we might still conduct some postponed version of the program—a sentiment echoed by the Indonesian partners with whom I develop these programs. Other partners,



Figure 2: Participants in the “Power and Politics” group continued their discussions informally, long after the required topics had been covered.

such as the US Embassy in Jakarta, were eager to investigate ways to take advantage of the relationships we had already built with the Indonesian students who had been admitted into the program. Embassy YSEALI staff had helped to develop, publicize, and run the recruitment for Indonesian students, fielding hundreds of applications and helping to interview scores of applicants. My UPS students had already begun communicating with this group through videos and messages posted to an online forum and were preparing to shift toward collaboratively developing visual research projects in the second half of the semester.

### Abroad Online: Reassessing Goals

As it became clear the travel portion of the program would be canceled, I began thinking through ways we could all still make something of these connections we had worked hard to establish. I spent spring break researching online collaboration work between distant partners and developing an “online abroad program” that would ideally achieve some of the same goals I had for the trip itself while being sensitive to students’ various constraints. The goals were built around investigating five cultural themes we focused on throughout the course—gender/sexuality, religion, ethnicity/race, human ecology/environment, and power/politics—with the goal of broadly increasing intercultural competence for all participants. These themes were chosen specifically to highlight areas of cultural difference and similarity between (and within) Indonesian and North American<sup>9</sup> program participants, and were reflected in course materials, readings, and discussions. The assignments I developed were built around a series of structured, small-group

conversations, a collaborative curation of reading and viewing materials, and a shared personal reflection.

In my recent work, I critically explore discourse and practice surrounding short-term study abroad culture in the US and argue for a broad refocusing on pedagogical outcomes. The coronavirus experience compelled me to approach the same discussion from a juxtaposed perspective, concentrating on which pedagogical goals associated with study abroad might be achieved (or at least approached) through other means—means that remain available without travel.

My programs have focused on bringing people from varied backgrounds together to explore trenchant cultural issues collaboratively and in social context. The challenge of this moment has been in rapidly crafting interventions that do not rely on the exploration of social contexts, and that can work within the narrow confines of online communications technology (as well as inequal access to it). To do this, I turned to the idea of *autoethnography*, in which participants reflect not just on their own lives, but on how those personal experiences intersect with broader cultural patterns and processes.<sup>10</sup>

## Online Autoethnography

### *Principles*

The assignment structure for this program was built around several principles. First, UPS and YSEALI participants should have the same workload and responsibilities—the program should not position Indonesian participants as repositories of cultural knowledge, but should instead provide an egalitarian forum for cultural exchange and dialogue. Second, participants should be working toward a common, collaborative goal. Although I also included an individual reflection, the program was built around an assignment that compelled participants to peer-review one another's representations of their work together, incentivizing them to draw one another out and foster investment.<sup>11</sup> Third, though conversations between participants needed to include personal, autoethnographic reflection, they were built around an academic agenda. While developing rapport and drawing on personal experience are essential to an effective exchange, the focus of that exchange must be structured around key topical themes to foster a productive forum for intercultural learning. Finally, reflecting Kolb's stages of experiential learning, all participants needed to be given agency in shaping the foci of those discussions to reflect their own interests and backgrounds. What follows is a brief description of each assignment.

### *Overview*

The Online Collaboration Assignment consisted of two to four videoconferences between teams of four (two UPS students and two YSEALI students), and a

collaboratively written piece addressing questions surrounding each team's cultural theme, to which all team members had to contribute. For UPS students, this assignment informed other coursework such as their research papers; however, reflecting principle 1 (above), it was an independent assignment focused on egalitarian collaboration between UPS and YSEALI partners. Because we could not conduct ethnographic field assignments together, participants were encouraged to turn the ethnographic lens on themselves. Collaborations across cultural themes focused on students' own experiences and backgrounds, as well as our reading and research into the themes (which were made available to YSEALI participants via a shared Google Drive folder). Because of this, participants were encouraged to choose a theme they were comfortable discussing in relation to their own personal experience.

### ***Assignment: First Conversations***

Before work on this project began, all participants were assigned to topical, four-person teams reflecting the course themes and their own preferences (smaller teams served to keep scheduling and technology challenges manageable). UPS students had completed coursework and an annotated bibliography, developing some background knowledge on their theme in the Indonesian context. Teams then communicated to schedule online conversations using Zoom or similar software. Participants were encouraged to take notes during or after the conversations.

Instructions for the conversations were very specific, including a numbered agenda outlining an order of events, with the expectation that students could lean on this structure when their discussions did not flow naturally. This first conversation's instructions focused on students getting to know one another and discovering what drew each team member to the group's theme. In addition to building rapport, the goal of this conversation was for students to develop a better understanding of how each member defined, conceived of, or framed the cultural theme, what they associated with it, and how those associations grew from their background. The secondary goal was to better understand the similarities and differences between these framings and their relationships to other themes such as class, gender, or ethnicity. Students were instructed to prepare five-minute autobiographies for these first conversations, as well as a story or anecdote from their own lives that exemplified why they were drawn to the team's particular theme. They were also encouraged to prepare and pose a question to the group connected to the theme, such as (for the religion team) how religious identity was expressed publicly in the regions where everyone had grown up.

### ***Assignment: Discussing Readings***

While the initial conversations (which lasted for one to two hours) were designed to allow students to get to know one another and broach topics related to their





Figure 3: “Human Ecology and Environment” group members discussed intersections between environmental activism and religion.

cultural theme, the remaining conversations were intended to refocus groups’ attention on concrete case studies related to those themes. They also allowed for a degree of agency through students’ choice of sources and discussion-leading.

For the second and subsequent conversations (students could use their own judgment as to how many would be required), the focus shifted to these shared case studies drawn from scholarship and popular media. Team members chose and shared theme-related articles, news reports, and videos with one another, and then met online to discuss each of them as a group. These media sources had to relate to the team’s theme as it intersected with either Indonesia, North America, or both. The goal of these conversations was to explore how academics, journalists, and others have investigated topics related to each group’s theme in ways that resonated with students’ academic and personal interests, and to explore how those works highlighted cultural similarity and difference. Along with their sources, each student wrote and distributed three open-ended discussion questions to the rest of their team, and in their Zoom conversations, the student who had chosen the source also lead the discussion.

### ***Assignments: Collaboration and Reflection***

After these conversations concluded, teams were asked to discuss their takeaways and develop a plan to address the assignment’s comprehensive essay prompt in a collaborative fashion involving all members. Students were encouraged to write in a way that reflected their collective rather than personal perspectives, summarizing shared themes from the conversations, and reserving their individual perspectives

for a separate reflection video. I chose to grade the collaborative essay as a group project (a practice I normally avoid) as a way of encouraging students to actively involve their peers and promote interdependency. The prompt itself asked students to explore their shifts in understanding surrounding the group's theme and its manifestation, both internationally and domestically, linking the shifts to shared literature and autoethnographic insights. It further asked students to reflect on how their own cultural backgrounds had been cast into relief through the cultural patterning revealed in their online discussions.

Finally, all students were asked to complete a personal reflection video, shared on the final day of class, when we attempted (with a degree of success) to bring together all the YSEALI and UPS participants in one Zoom meeting. Students were asked to reflect on what insights they gained regarding similarity and difference between and within Indonesia and North America, as well as what they learned about their theme through the collaboration that they likely would not have otherwise.

### **Disambiguating Outcomes**

Based on students' collaborative written work and oral presentations, the program was successful in cultivating the sorts of insights, relativism, empathy, and perspective-shifting associated with intercultural competence.<sup>12</sup> Among the themes that emerged across the teams, differences in the role of religion in daily life proved highly fertile ground for discussion, as did commonalities in colorism and the construction of racial categories. I would argue this success derives from mobilizing not just experiential learning theory, but also twenty-first-century ethnographic approaches to collaboration and dialogue. When I am able to bring students to Indonesia again, this experience will inform the focus of assignments, and among other things, it has revealed to me the value in allowing students from UPS and Indonesia greater agency in shaping conversations toward their own experiences, backgrounds, and personal interests.

At the same time, the program was not without its challenges. Scheduling online discussions across twelve- or thirteen-hour time differences proved challenging, particularly in the month of Ramadan. Whereas UPS students were completing the assignments as part of a course, the YSEALI students were no longer as directly incentivized to invest in the program and were themselves contending with shifting university schedules and coronavirus-related challenges. Nevertheless, all participated in the online conversations, and many reported staying up for hours, chatting about their lives, popular culture, academics, the pandemic, and more. Although students continued to express disappointment that the travel portion of the program could not take place as planned, the experience was enough of a success that it generated discussion around the ubiquity of study abroad as the *de facto* framework for approaching these outcomes.



Indeed, crafting interventions like these compels us to think through what “learning outcomes” mean in the context of short-term study abroad: how much of what we are doing as international educators is fixed in the exoticism and novelty of touring and the commodified culture it so readily affords? Reflecting on the diverse and layered social contexts we encounter traveling abroad, how well are our students equipped to genuinely engage and apprehend them? Are students consistently given the background needed to effectively draw sophisticated insights from time spent in culturally novel settings? How much of our collective project is instead about demystifying faraway places or “lighting a spark” that may lead students toward more fulsome engagements in the future? If that is a central goal, to what extent are we in these programs, consciously or not, leveraging the very Orientalist dogmas we otherwise seek to deconstruct in the project of nudging students toward an imagined global citizenship? These are the questions I have struggled with in (re)imagining what “study abroad” might look like without actually going abroad.

The coronavirus pandemic has compelled many international education advocates to consider alternative approaches to achieving desired outcomes, but at the time of this writing, it is difficult to apprehend the extent to which this experience might broadly reframe faculty and staff attitudes in relation to study abroad. Such a reassessment could well resonate with the shift I have been advocating in my recent work: reframing study abroad as a pedagogical framework that—while it opens a range of experiential interventions that are largely impossible otherwise—is not itself a pedagogical outcome.<sup>13</sup> It is a shift, in other words, that would disambiguate travel from learning and critically center the power-inflected touring narratives that have undergirded study abroad since its inception.<sup>14</sup> While I would be pleased to witness such a shift and have found myself pushed further toward it by the pandemic, I am not optimistic such changes are likely, given the role short-term study abroad has come to play in the neoliberal university.

An *outcomes-centered approach* to international pedagogy frames time spent abroad as a forum for rich and unique pedagogy, including cross-cultural collaboration, but in this chapter I have argued that there are other ways to approach some of the same outcomes without travel. In my research and university administration work, I have been disappointed to see how uncommon the prioritization of pedagogical outcomes such as intercultural competence remains. I would argue this reflects the historically *travel-centered approach* to international education that frames all program benefits as coming from students being, to quote Bennett, “in the vicinity of events.”<sup>15</sup> While few would dismiss the extraordinary range of experiential learning opportunities opened up by international travel, to the extent that studying abroad in Asia remains difficult in the wake of the pandemic, exploring alternate ways to achieve some of study abroad’s core goals has become imperative. Even when global health is no longer a concern, the

challenges of conducting short-term programs in Asia, including the sometimes-exclusionary expense and hefty carbon footprint, mean international education advocates should always weigh the benefits of online exchange programs such as the one described here against international travel.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Ceccoli, Gao Jiayong, and Han Li, “Experiencing China through a ‘Wide-Angle Lens,” *Education about ASIA* 22, no. 3 (2017); Jane Jackson, “Ethnographic Pedagogy and Evaluation in Short-Term Study Abroad,” *Languages for Intercultural Communication and Education* 12 (2006), 134.

<sup>2</sup> Gareth Barkin, “In the Absence of Language: Modeling a Transformative, Short-Term Abroad Experience,” *Teaching Anthropology* 4, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Neriko Musha Doerr, “Do ‘Global Citizens’ Need the Parochial Cultural Other? Discourse of Immersion in Study Abroad and Learning-by-Doing,” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, no. ahead-of-print (2012), 1–20.; Talya Zemach-Bersin, “Global Citizenship and Study Abroad: It’s All about US,” *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices* 1, no. 2 (2007), 16–28.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Pearson Education, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Milton J. Bennett, “Paradigmatic Assumptions and a Developmental Approach to Intercultural Learning,” in *Student Learning Abroad: What our Students are Learning, What They’re Not, and What We Can Do about It*, eds. Michael Vande Berg, R. Michael Paige and Kris Hemming Lou (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2012), 90–114.

<sup>7</sup> George E. Marcus, “Beyond Malinowski and After *Writing Culture*: On the Future of Cultural Anthropology and the Predicament of Ethnography,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 13, no. 2 (2002), 191–199.

<sup>8</sup> LukeEric Lassiter et al., “Collaborative Ethnography and Public Anthropology,” *Current Anthropology* 46, no. 1 (2005), 83–106.

<sup>9</sup> Not all of the UPS students in the program were native English speakers nor were they from the United States.

<sup>10</sup> Tony E. Adams, Stacy Linn Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> The assignment structure drew inspiration from the classic “jigsaw classroom” concept developed by Aronson (Elliot Aronson, *The Jigsaw Classroom* (Sage, 1978)).

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell R. Hammer, “The Intercultural Development Inventory: A New Frontier in Assessment and Development of Intercultural Competence,” in *Student Learning Abroad: What Our Students Are Learning, What They’re Not, and What We Can Do about It*, eds. Michael Vande Berg, R. Michael Paige and Kris Hemming Lou (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2012), 115–136.

<sup>13</sup> Gareth Barkin, “Either Here or There: Short-Term Study Abroad and the Discourse of Going,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2018); Gareth Barkin, “The Imperative of Access in Short-Term Study Abroad: Provider Agencies, Liminality, and the Mediation of Cultural Difference,” in *Study Abroad: Service, Student Travel and the Quest for an Anti-Tourism Experience*, eds. Michael A. Di Giovine and John Bodinger de Uriarte (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> William Hoffa and Stephen C. DePaul, *A History of US Study Abroad: 1965–Present* (Carlisle, PA: Forum on Education Abroad, 2010), 511; Zemach-Bersin, “Global Citizenship and Study Abroad: It’s All about US,” 16–28.

<sup>15</sup> Bennett, “Paradigmatic Assumptions and a Developmental Approach to Intercultural Learning,” 110.