

Pedagogical Insights

Studying Away Post COVID-19 and Beyond: Making High Impact Learning Practices Equitable

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Abstract: Halfway through the Spring 2020 academic year, many institutions canceled face-to-face classes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this in-person to online transition, educators had to rethink how studying away could be offered to undergraduate students. Technology allowed some to provide study away opportunities, incorporate inclusive pedagogies, diversify the student study away population, and specifically target students traditionally underrepresented in study-away/study-abroad programs. This includes students who are first-generation, of color, from working-class families, and with disabilities. In doing so, the author of this work was able to provide high-impact learning practices for diverse students and expose students to the research process while studying away, via an online asynchronous course. Here, the author shares some practices of leading a fully online study away course via video site visits, virtual student travel, and expert interviews. This work is important as it advances the literature on the pedagogies and practices of Interdisciplinary educators.

Keywords: study away; virtual learning; online learning; study abroad; diversity equity inclusion; experiential learning

1. Introduction

In 2019 The author of this work planned a study away course for a class of about 25 undergraduate students to travel to New Orleans during the Spring 2020 semester. The goal was for the students to experience Louisiana culture, learn the local history, and immerse in the community via mentoring an after-school program of middle and high school students. However, during the 2020 Spring semester, the institution and many universities around the world experienced a dramatic shift and the impacts of COVID-19 on college campuses (Maraqa et al., 2022). Immediately schools were forced to withdraw in-person classes, instead offering virtual options or emergency remote teaching, which lasted roughly 2 years for many campuses (Schrenk et al., 2021; Clum et al., 2022). Therefore, about two weeks before the study away course was to depart for New Orleans, the institution canceled all travel, including the study away course, in an attempt to halt the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This face-to-face to online transition forced instructors, students, and campus communities to adapt and to make creative changes quickly. Some viewed these campus transitions as necessary adjustments to encourage institutions to make accommodations previously refused or did not know how to make. Many agree that these accommodations were opportunities to make learning more accessible and equitable for students.

At the University of Central Florida, an alternative way for students to continue to experience studying away during a time when college campuses were still facing COVID-related challenges was proposed. Technology would allow for teaching and learning opportunities that had been largely overlooked before the global pandemic (Baa & Minj, 2023; Farzana, 2023; Kumar & Narasimham, 2023). This institutional change transformed into a chance to incorporate inclusive pedagogies, diversify the student study away population, and specifically target students traditionally underrepresented in study away or study abroad opportunities. Such includes making high-impact learning practices and experiential learning much more available to first-generation college students (Conefrey, 2021), students of color (Luedke et al., 2019), students from families of low socioeconomic status (Peters et al., 2019), students with disabilities (Johnstone & Edwards, 2020), and other student groups (Bikos et

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al., 2019). This would all be done through an online study away course centering St. Augustine, Florida

2. Literature Review

The study away is an experiential learning course incorporating domestic travel within the United States (Stinnett, 2018). Study aways promote active learning (Lane et al., 2017), incite cultural competency (Abe-Hiraishi et al., 2018), expose students to our multicultural country, and prepare students with the skills to be leaders in our ever-changing society (Chakraborty & Proctor, 2019). High-impact learning opportunities, such as study away courses, also encourage interpersonal and intrapersonal development and can aid in student retention (Gonzales et al., 2022), can facilitate service-learning components (Engberg et al., 2018), and can incorporate internships (deLusé & Thomas, 2022). Ultimately, study away programs have been proven high-impact learning practices that benefit students' personal, professional, and academic development.

Although study aways would be valuable for all students, many students cannot take advantage of these high-impact learning courses. Such opportunities that are experienced off campus, seem to be mostly enjoyed by students from middle-class backgrounds (Whatley & Clayton, 2020). Making these programs more accessible to traditionally underrepresented and marginalized students would allow this high-impact learning opportunity to be much more equitable for everyone. With this study away course, it has been a duty to make educational travel an option for all students regardless of financial status, ability or disability, citizenship, familial and work responsibilities, or other challenges that might deter a student from studying abroad or studying away.

Although an online study away had never been offered at the University of Central Florida before, many of the campus courses, have been offered via a web-based format, even before the COVID-19 switch to online instruction. Because of this, some strategies for online high-impact courses were learned from University of Central Florida faculty who have successfully executed an online study abroad (Howard et al., 2017; Howard & Gunter, 2017; Futch et al., 2016). Although the previous initiatives focused more on international learning than the domestic experiences of a study away, much was learned about bringing outside experiences to the students inside the classroom.

3. Purpose and Research Questions

The online study away to St. Augustine, Florida, was created to provide high-impact learning practices for all interested students. This course aimed to expose students to the research process, provide students with the opportunity to study away under university and local travel restrictions (especially those evident during the COVID-19 pandemic), and make the opportunity fair and equitable for undergraduates. This paper will share some of the practices used to lead a fully online study away course. In doing so, the following questions will be answered:

- A. How can study away courses be provided to students in this post-COVID-19 society and beyond?
- B. How can these learning opportunities be equitable and accessible to students?

4. Planning and Preparing for the Study Away

Multiple methods and tools were used to make the online study possible. First, a faculty member from The University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning (CDL) was able to help the instructor of the course with the filming and technology related to the online course. This faculty member had previous experience with making a study abroad course available online for students. She was instrumental in recording the site visits, creating accessible files and links to the videos, connecting students to video chats during live discussions, and executing other technological needs to support the course and the students. Some specific technologies needed were a cell phone, internet access/portable Wi-Fi unit, a camera, a cell phone/device stabilizer, portable chargers, a microphone, and a laptop.

While planning and preparing for this online study away, the course technology needed to be tested before entering the field, and backup plans needed to be created in case of technology failure (Howard et al., 2018). Hence, arriving in St. Augustine, Florida about one day before the study away was to begin was imperative. During the early time there, a meeting between the faculty member from the CDL and the instructor of the course was facilitated,

and a plan was strategized for the best use of time. The CDL faculty member shared some of her technology and devices that would be used for the course, went over a few plans for the week, and discussed some of the limitations of the sites (for example, no internet connection at some site visits, forecast of inclement weather when visiting outdoor sites, etc.). Collectively, the pre-course preparation greatly assisted in the success of the study away.

5. Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) helped to shape the course. CRT is not only concerned with race but also considers the intersecting ways in which individuals experience barriers in society. “Intersectionality moves beyond racial essentialism and a Black/White racial binary to con-siderations of race across races, and also considers how race intersects with other identities, such as language, ability, gender, social class, gender identity, and sexuality” (Capper, 2015, p. 799). This framework is necessary, as the target students for the study away experience multiple obstacles that would typically prevent them from participating in programs such as the study away. For example, this study away course aimed to create high-impact learning opportunities for undocumented students, who are often students of color and could be unable to travel abroad because of their undocumented status (Hall, 2023). This course also aspired to bring opportunities to students of color not often represented in study abroad and similar oppor-tunities (Butler et al., 2018). Such students sometimes experience financial barriers to travel (Vernon et al., 2017), have a disability that isn’t being accommodated (Johnstone & Edwards, 2020), possess familial and work responsibilities (Whatley & Raby, 2020), and other hurdles that prohibit them from traveling. Because CRT is equity and justice-centered (Thieman, 2021; Pedroso et al., 2023), it encouraged the consideration of the multiple ways that students with these intersectional identities might face barriers and allowed the consideration of accom-modations to limit the challenges that such students might face when attempting to study away.

6. Discussion of Pedagogy and Practices Utilized

This virtual study away was piloted during Spring 2022, with 3 graduating seniors. The course was initially offered as a hybrid course, however, it ended up being conducted fully online. To put this into context, the campus community just returned from winter break, when many families around the country gathered for wintertime holidays. During this time, COVID-19 rates began to rise again, new virus variants were detected, and many new positive cases were reported. This increase in positive cases led many instructors to transform face-to-face courses into hybrid modalities, allowing students to come to campus if they could, or instead learn from home if needed. Many students were similarly taking necessary precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This is in addition to the fact that the majority of Interdisciplinary Studies students take their classes online for numerous reasons, such as their geographic distance away from campus and because their work and life responsibilities do not allow them to travel to campus regularly. A combination of the aforementioned factors led the course to be offered fully web-based.

The class was a semester-long course that used virtual study away as an opportunity to introduce students to the research process and Black history in St. Augustine. Students used the first half of the course to prepare for their research. During this time, they explored online archives that stored Black culture and experiences in St. Augustine, and they considered complex research questions that they would like to explore during the semester. Although investigating their interdisciplinary research questions from the integrated insights of varying disciplines, the students eventually chose topics around Black women’s activism, critical race theory and how the history of St. Augustine is taught, and the Civil Rights Movement in St. Augustine. After establishing a topic and research questions, the students conducted a literature search and wrote a literature review on the available research within their interdisciplinary research topics. At the mid-semester point, students submitted a research proposal where they defended their research questions/complex issue, and presented an organized plan of how they would collect their data. During spring break, the course instructor traveled to St. Augustine and made all information collected during the time away available on Canvas (a web-based learning software) for the students. The students then collected data from the virtual visits, artifacts, and online video meetings of the study away. At the end of the semester, they would use their findings to create a multimedia research final project that would be presented to their peers.

The major accommodations provided to students included video site visits, virtual student travel, and expert interviews.

6.1. *Video site visits*

Every site visited was video recorded, and later made available on Canvas for all students. The exact process was to have the faculty member from CDL record every aspect of each site visit, upload the videos to a shareable platform (such as YouTube and Vimeo), and then embed the videos directly into Canvas. Accommodations would be incorporated to make the videos accessible for all students, such as adding closed captioning. Last, each video was captioned with a short description and summary to introduce each site visit to the students. Students could then watch each site visit, exactly as it was seen in person.

During the time in St. Augustine, many educational sites were visited. Some included the ACCORD Civil Rights Museum and Castillo de San Marcos. Before visiting, an email was sent to the ACCORD Civil Rights Museum to schedule a visit, a mandatory COVID-19 precaution the museum required at the time. It was explained to the museum's curator that the visit would be for an online course, and she offered a personal guided tour for the class. Once a time was agreed upon, the museum curator permitted the guided tour to be filmed, as long the museum artifacts were mostly included, rather than focusing the video on the curator's face the entire time. For example, as she explained the connection of the Monson Motor Lodge to Civil Rights activism, the audio focused on her words. Simultaneously, the camera lens focused on artifacts related to the information she was relaying. In this case, the visual was a historic photo from 1964 that captured the moment the Monson Motor Lodge manager poured acid into the pool while young people were inside the water protesting against the motel's segregation policy—that is the pool was “Whites only,” and the motel did not allow African Americans to swim in the pool, so they poured acid into the pool while Black protestors were in the water. The curator also answered some questions, as provided by the students, to support student research. Because she spoke directly to the students in the videos, this guided tour was presented as if the students were there in person.

In contrast, the visit to the Castillo de San Marcos was a bit different. No personalized tours were available, so instead the fortress was walked without a guide. However, many placards around the fortress provided historical information on specific aspects of the site. The signs operated as an unofficial tour guide, and they were video recorded, without audio, so that students could read at their leisure on Canvas. Under the Canvas video, a link was inserted that directed students to additional resources related to a specific portion of the fort. This was done for each video and image of Castillo de San Marcos. For example, with a video clip on an image of Francisco Mendez (a formerly enslaved African man who escaped to St. Augustine and lived free in Fort Mose), a link was provided to a national park webpage that centered the presence and contributions of free and formerly enslaved Africans in Castillo de San Marcos and St. Augustine. Students were able to visit the website to learn more information on fugitive slave policies in Florida, the efforts of paid African women domestic workers, and the roles of Black male soldiers.

6.2. *Virtual student travel*

One of the aspects of the online course that the students appreciated, was the virtual site visits, as some students learned best through active engagement and community online. This is when live video calls were incorporated for pre-selected site visits. The specific sites for the virtual student travel were locations that offered visitors reliable access to Wi-Fi. A stable and accessible Wi-Fi connection was imperative for the live Zoom meeting (video call), for students to connect with the class, and for the virtual site visit. As backup, a portable Wi-Fi device was used if the site's internet connection was unstable or unreliable. A few days before the virtual student travel, the students were provided with a link to the Zoom meeting, and they could use the link to log onto the call on the day of the site visit. This opportunity allowed students to engage and experience in real-time, with the instructor and any people who were both physically and virtually present.

An example of this virtual student travel was incorporated with the class visit to the Lincolntonville Museum and Cultural Center. This museum is housed in the town's former Black high school, Excelsior High School, with Wi-Fi available to museum patrons. The museum centers on the people and the history of the historic area of Lincolntonville, a historically Black neighborhood in St. Augustine, Florida. Hence, students who joined the Zoom meeting were provided a live guided tour and virtually immersed in the histories, stories, and experiences of Black St. Augustine. During the live video call, the students engaged with the curator, asked

the tour guide questions about the exhibits, and inquired about additional resources for their interdisciplinary research projects.

Not all students were able to attend the live tour, however. For those unable to log in at the scheduled time, the video recording of the tour was made available on Canvas for them to view when they could. To do this, the entire virtual meeting was recorded, then downloaded and saved, to be later embedded into Canvas for the students to view. The students who watched the visit after its recording were provided the contact information of the curator, in case they had questions or if they wanted more information or resources.

6.3. *Expert interviews*

At the major site visits, some of the people who have research areas or training in specific aspects of St. Augustine's history or culture were interviewed. These are the individuals who are considered experts. Before the instructor left for the study away, students submitted their research and interview questions. Those questions, in combination with instructor-created questions, were posed to the experts. The experts provided in-depth responses and suggested further resources for student learning. The interviews were video recorded in full, closed captioned, and placed on Canvas for all students to access.

One of the interviews was with a park ranger at Fort Mose. Fort Mose was a 1700s military fortress, that housed the first free Black settlement in what is now the United States (Turner, 2022). This included a Black militia, and formerly enslaved Black people who were promised their freedom if they supported the Spanish that ruled the area (Landers, 1990). Today, Fort Mose is memorialized as a historic site that preserves the legacy of the people of the fort (Levine, 2023). The park ranger interviewed worked on the site for decades, helped to create some of the exhibits in the site's museum, and was knowledgeable about the future/current plans for developing a recreation/memorial of Fort Mose. Some examples of the questions posed to the park ranger included: 1. What is some general information about Fort Mose?; 2. What were some of the contributions of Black women in Fort Mose?; and, 3. Is the history of Black St. Augustine often told with the larger history of St. Augustine? The ranger provided the students with very rich responses, shared information on upcoming events at the Fort, and made himself available to students for further questions.

Another expert interview was also performed with a curator of the Lincolnville Museum and Cultural Center. However, this interview was conducted live via Zoom, so in addition to the instructor-prepared questions, students were also able to ask questions that they had about the museum, their research projects, or the virtual tour they took with the curator. Similar to the expert at Fort Mose, the expert at the Lincolnville Museum and Cultural Center went above and beyond to answer questions from the students. Although this interview was conducted in real-time, the discussion was similarly recorded and placed on Canvas for students to access for later viewing.

7. Implications, Limitations, and Studying Away in the Future

This accessible course allowed undergraduate students to experience the culture and history of St. Augustine, without requiring students to travel away physically. Instead, St. Augustine was brought to the students. Students did not have to pay for the typical costs related to a study away (flight, rooming, food, etc.), and students did not have to do the extreme walking, often in inaccessible areas that are usually affiliated with a study away or study abroad. In all, this course made a high-impact and experiential learning opportunity much more available to students who are unable to pay for costly study abroad opportunities, students who have unaccommodated disabilities, students who are non-traditional and have work/familial responsibilities that cannot be abandoned, and students with dependents that require their care and attention. All such students are typically underrepresented in traditional study away and study abroad courses. In other words, an online study away course could be an equitable means of making high-impact learning practices available to all students.

Some of the challenges faced with the study away, and that others might face when attempting to recreate a similar course or program, would be funding to support the course. When the course was initially proposed, the plan was to get grant funding to support the travel, site visits, food/meals, and other costs related to the physical travel. Although various grants were applied for, no funding was secured from any of the grants. Applying for multiple grants did become labor-intensive and very time-consuming. Unfortunately, many faculty members do not always have the extra time to invest in applying for grants to support coursework. Ultimately, support was received from the Dean of the College of Undergraduate

Studies, who was able to commit funds from the budget for the study away course. However, the longevity of providing such low-cost opportunities to students is unknown. This means that if there is no funding for the course, then the course cannot run.

Society is continually changing, and COVID-19 made it possible for educators to become more creative with the delivery of curriculums. While some campuses have been attempting to transition from online courses, back to in-person, this research is evidence that online courses could and should be part of our new normal, as they can help to provide equitable opportunities to marginalized students. Hopefully, this online study away course will open the door for similar, and even better opportunities for students in the future.

With new developments in technology available yearly and the fast evolution of what technology can do to advance education, this online study away could evolve into something even bigger. It is imagined that this could happen with multiple, sometimes costly, tools. At a minimum, drones for aerial views would allow some site visits to be explored from angles not visible from a typical camera, iPad, or tablet. Even further, 3D goggles and headsets like the Apple Vision Pro could allow students to navigate site visits virtually. Because Artificial Intelligence (AI) has advanced learning opportunities (Grubaugh et al., 2023; Kotsis, 2024), AI might also be able to strengthen this course. Essentially, technological innovations could allow for studying away online to be limitless for students who enroll.

This work adds to the available literature on the pedagogies and practices of Interdisciplinary scholars, practitioners, and educators. It supports the importance of students' Interdisciplinary thinking, exposing students to high-impact learning practices, and adjusting our teaching to the needs of students and society. It is important for us to continue to share efforts as we advance the field and academia. In future endeavors, study away students will be in-terviewed in order to better understand the direct experiences and impacts of online study aways on student retention and academic development.

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