

Professor's Perspective: Preparing Your Language

by Phillip John Usher

Around this time of year, many students ask me how to make the most of their upcoming study abroad. The first step, of course, is to explore what programs are available and which ones best fit your intellectual and personal goals. Barnard's website has plenty of information. To give you an idea, the site lists 11 programs for France, 12 for Germany, seven for Japan, as well as a host of others that can have you on your way to Argentina, Belize, Cameroon, Kenya, Morocco, and so forth. Deadlines vary and some have already passed, so if you're planning to travel in Spring 2009, look quickly! Talk to your language professors, to fellow students, and to Dean Gretchen Young for Study Abroad Advising. Once you've selected a program to which to apply and once you've organized the paperwork, then what? You will be advised on such issues as visas and immunizations, you should check on the website and with your advisor on how to get credit for your courses, etc. But what about preparing for the specifically linguistic challenges? Reviewing grammar is important, but it's only part of the puzzle. Here are three other suggestions:

The single most important thing is to indulge in what, in reference to medieval pilgrims, is called "peregrinatio in stabilitate"—in other words "armchair travel."

Sit down somewhere and imagine you are there (France, Senegal, Germany, etc.), project your identity abroad, break down the likely linguistic challenges into manageable chunks (formal situations, making friends, bureaucracy, etc) and then ask yourself what you need to learn. Although you got an A for that paper written in accurate French about Godard's use in his film *Masculin Féminin* of Molière's line "Toute chose t'égaie et rien ne t'inquiète," would you be able, for example, to tell a new acquaintance that you play the oboe and sing in a choir, that your sister works in PR but dreams of becoming an astronaut, that you grew up on an army base in Italy

or on a llama farm in Vermont, that you have a Cocker Spaniel named Bob who has cute ears but a terrible flea problem? Or that you make replicas of Gothic cathedrals out of matchsticks? Or that you love the smell of fresh bay leaves? Ask yourself if you'd be able to talk about the personal and intellectual topics that interest and define you. Can you tell your story? That is the vocabulary you most need to know before you leave, as well as good grammar and a knowledge of the customs of the new culture. On a more serious note, are you prepared to respond in a foreign language when someone brings up aspects of your racial, social, or cultural identity? If not, think about what questions might be asked and how best to respond.

Connected to this is preparing for real-life linguistic needs. Could you tell the waiter in Berlin you're lactose intolerant or that you don't eat meat? Or that you're allergic to shellfish? Think through the situations you might find yourself in and prepare for them—with a dictionary, by searching the Internet, and by talking with your language instructors. It may seem like homework and it may seem like a minor point, but if you can easily deal with such things, you can more quickly set about enjoying your new location.

Less like homework is making the foreign language part of your daily life before you leave. Seek out all opportunities. Visit Columbia's *Maison Française*, *Deutsches Haus*, *Italian Academy*, the *Harriman Institute* for Slavic languages, and other neighborhood resources, many of which offer rich programs, such as film evenings and lectures. Without even leaving your dorm room, there are opportunities: many foreign television stations now have a certain proportion of their content available online. For French, for example, you might log on to france5.fr where you can watch shows on various topics, from architecture (*La galerie des glaces*) to health (*Allô docteur!*) or cooking (*Escapades de Petitrenaud*), or you might turn to france2.fr to watch *Café littéraire*, or watch the news each morning on tv5.org or france24.com. Similar resources exist for other languages. Not only will daily exposure to the language help you tune your ear, but you will quickly get a handle on what people might be talking about when you arrive!

Above all, proper preparation means getting ready to deal with new situations so that, once you arrive at your destination, you're able seek out every opportunity to use the language. The best advice on this comes from Tatiana Chilcovsky, a French major currently at the American University Center of Provence: "Experience everything! Don't sit at your computer watching American TV shows on iTunes. Go to a cafe, strike up a conversation with someone new, go on an excursion, make friends with other students. Try not just to inhabit your study abroad city, but to become a part of the way of life there." Study abroad is exciting and can be (as it was for me) life-changing.

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Life at Barnard

An Interview with Dean of Study Abroad, Gretchen Young

by Allegra Panetto

Whether anticipating or returning from a semester overseas, Barnard students rely on the College's Study Abroad Program as an invaluable resource for information and advice. This summer, amidst a slew of administrative changes, the College appointed Gretchen Young as Dean of Study Abroad. Although Dean Young is new to the College, she is not new to New York, or to the field of education. "I have worked at the types of schools that feed into Barnard, and I feel that all of my experiences have come to this point, and it's perfect," she said. Before Barnard, Dean Young was the Program Specialist in the Study Abroad Office at the University of Connecticut. Before her tenure at UConn, she directed School for International Training (SIT) study abroad programs in Africa. Even as an undergraduate at Middlebury, Dean Young had strong ties to the College, studying abroad at Barnard's Reid Hall program in France. The *Bulletin* sat down with Dean Young to hear about her background, her philosophies and what students should know throughout the study abroad experience.

Barnard Bulletin: What drew you to Barnard?

Dean Young: What didn't? The setting in New York, especially after spending ten years overseas. The institution's reputation. Barnard reminds me a lot of my alma mater, Middlebury College, in size and emphasis of the individual.

BB: Who is an ideal candidate for study abroad?

DY: Someone with the right attitude. You have to be able to deal with ambiguity and to let go. Flexibility and good sense of humor are also crucial. You have to be able to laugh at yourself. You have to want to learn and challenge yourself, and know that you won't always be in control.

BB: What do you like about Barnard's current study abroad program?

DY: The broad spectrum of programs, the academic integrity. I really like the language requirement because it prevents the American "bubble" abroad. I also like how students can petition to add a program to the approved programs list.

BB: Most recently, you served as a program specialist in the study abroad program at UConn, and also directed a multitude of international training programs in Africa. How will your background be valuable to Barnard?

DY: My experience working at SIT in Africa helped me know what to look for in a program—what works and what doesn't. It helps me understand whether or not a student should go on a program focused on field studies or direct enrollment. The type of program needs to mesh with what you imagine the experience to be. The fun part of my job is preparing students and setting their expectations. Readjusting when you return is also important. At UConn we had an institutional standpoint of global citizenship that I hope to bring here.

BB: You established a Peace Corps site in Madagascar. Do you feel volunteering and fieldwork are crucial components of a study abroad experience?

DY: Not necessarily. It's an excellent way to integrate but you can't go into a developing country thinking you are going to save the world. With fieldwork, you have to realize that you're going as a learner and not a teacher. Some students want that in an abroad experience, however, so I don't discourage it.

BB: What would you say to a student who knows they want to go abroad but can't seem to decide on a country?

DY: You can't go wrong once you've done your research. It's very important to set your expectations properly. Choices like a rural versus urban location, direct enrollment versus fieldwork. You have to ask yourself these questions. The act of study abroad is greater than where you go. Learning a language, in particular.

BB: What do you think the biggest challenges are for a student studying abroad, specifically a Barnard student?

DY: For a Barnard student specifically, leaving New York City is hard. With all the different neighborhoods and diverse sense of culture you can feel abroad right here in New York.

BB: As you know, Barnard offers students returning from study abroad opportunities to discuss their experiences through online forums and events. What will you offer returning students? Do you see them as a valuable resource?

DY: Returning students are the best resource. They speak to what life is like on the ground. I would love to brainstorm and hear returning students' stories. At SIT we had reentry seminars that helped readjust to the day-to-day. Bringing your curriculum abroad back into the classroom is also an important aspect of integration that I will be focusing on.

Allegra Panetto is a Barnard senior and Bulletin Co-Editor-in-Chief.