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Final Reflection on Study Abroad in Pskov, Russia

During my time at NC State University the university itself, especially in the college of education, Teaching Fellows, and the MSL program, has placed a great deal of time and energy into making students aware of diversity in people, culture, and places. For the past five years I have spent time every semester becoming gradually more and more aware of what it means to really be culturally aware, culturally proficient, and globally aware. Ever since I can remember thinking about the world outside of the four walls I grew up in I have considered myself to be a tolerant, curious, and generally aware individual. Of course, as it is said, “The more I learn the less I know.” With increasing awareness of what there is there also comes an increasing awareness of what hasn’t been even experienced yet.

My definition of global awareness hasn’t changed since I first journaled about it and I think that is hasn’t because it is easy enough to conceptually understand what the term means. Experience is the key however and the same saying about learning goes for experience as well. The more experiences I have the more I realize how much I haven’t experienced. You can never reach the top! What a wonderful realization though to know you can go and go and never reach an end to experiences! Concept and experience are almost synonymous with theory and practice. It’s better when you can work on a spectrum or merge the two. Until Russia I didn’t have the kind of experience it took to link concept with deeper connections.

The thing that has changed since pre-departure is an even deeper understanding that there isn’t a maximum amount of global awareness that a person can obtain. I also think more about how language affects our level of awareness. Learning Russian in five weeks was pretty slow work, especially when everyone wanted my colleague and I to speak English. But, by listening to the people, the songs, and practicing what bit of Russian I was able to it started a change in me that no one could physically see. I could feel it though. When I became aware of the language it was like I was viewing the world through a different pair of lenses. I still had my eyes, my perceptions and background but something about working with another nation’s language makes the term “global awareness” really mean something special. Before that word was just a general term but not anymore.

One of my dear Russian friends told me it was like the metaphor of birth. When the seed is planted it starts to grow and suddenly your Russian soul is born…or your English soul if you turn the tables around. The most beautiful thing about becoming globally aware is acquiring and borrowing culture that you didn’t have before. The language, food, cooking styles and techniques, home management, the dress, the dreams even! It is a feeling…not just an idea or concept or something in one of the ka-zillion textbooks we’ve been required to read on diversity and culture. Experience is truly a teacher like no other. It makes things *real*! It gives deeper meaning and feeling to concepts. This is similar to experience of student teaching. Being told how to do and what to try in certain situations doesn’t prepare you for the job like actually practicing in the field. Global awareness requires action.

I learned more about my cultural identity because of this trip than I thought I could or would. This trip has made me value characteristics of mine I took for granted. I’ve learned to be flexible and adaptable over the years, but never would I have thought that it would allow me to feel the way I do now about myself. I’ll explain. I am an American. What does that mean? What does it tell you about me? I don’t know what your answer is but my answer is the only one I think is truly fitting and I reply, “It says I’m a mutt (and I rather like it)!”

Many of us (I mean the group of Americans I identify with on the yearly census) don’t know where we come from. We are simply part of the English, Anglo-Saxon, or European white race and many of us have forgotten or have had no chance to learn where our roots actually lie. When I was trying to come up with 10 characteristics of my cultural identity before leaving for Russia I am a slightly saddened to say I had a little trouble doing it. Most of us only speak one language, English. It is a language many people want to learn and many Americans expect others to learn it (especially if they come to the U.S.), but in reality it is a mutt too! The English language has borrowed and borrowed and borrowed from other language to such an extent that if it were a person it would probably be in debt up to its eyeballs.

The beauty of this mutt quality in both the language and the people, blended with the quality of being adaptable helped me truly feel like a part of another culture. I think it was easy to embrace Russian language and culture in a way because of the lack of strong attachment to my own, which is interesting because I actually don’t feel like I have a lack of cultural identity. I just don’t feel fixated on one identity in general. I embrace the inner mutt! My ancestry is Irish and English. I was mistaken for Turkish while in Russian once, French by a person in St. Petersburg, and German by a man in the U.S. airport. I love Spanish culture and can read, speak and write some in the language. I was mistaken to be Russian four times at least (while I wasn’t trying to have a conversation) and I was told numerous times that I laugh like a gypsy (which is a group of people most Russians don’t actually like). This feeling of all of these moments is fun, exciting, and encouraging. Now, I feel like I belong…like I have a place or a piece of Russia that will always be mine. I can’t shake her now. She’s part of my experiences and now a part of my identity.

When I was at the linguistics conference I told the concluding panel that my heart had to have grown three times larger having experienced so many viewpoints from across the globe on an issue that binds us all…language. I also visited the Alexander Nevsky ceremonies and listened to the history and the pride of the people. I couldn’t understand anything that was being said in the concluding discussion panel of the ceremonies, but I knew the feeling. I understood the emotion. It made me feel proud of my son’s name even. I have always like his name, Sean Alexander Vann Huffman (A.K.A. Alex), but after learning about the history of Russia and the story of Alexander Nevsky I had pride too. One day I’ll tell him about Alexander Nevsky and I’ll still have that feeling. It’s palpable and powerful. Russia is a world away from where I was born. I have no knowledge of anyone in my family even knowing anything about Russia, but I only felt closer and closer to it the longer I stayed and the more I listened and communicated with the people.

Communication is the key. Studying Russian history, listening to the news, even learning the language but in isolation of native speakers…it means nothing unless there is real communication. Through sharing anecdotes, ideas, and concerns using our language, adapting and working together to come to an understanding and determine meaning we were able to identify with each other. Culture identities I think are like charm bracelets. You start out with a simple bracelet and at each milestone you add a charm, never losing what you already had, only acquiring new pieces. In life you are born into a family and become part of a community and every experience makes you who you are. The older one gets I think the larger that community should be and of course even more diverse.