

The Impact of Communications Technology on the Study Abroad Field

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Before computers there were index cards and shoe boxes. That's where I began. From there to here has been an interesting journey.

It all started in 1977, when my college asked me to be its study abroad adviser. The first person I turned to for advice in setting up a resource library was Lily von Klemperer (editor's note: in whose name NAFSA annually makes an award honoring a young member for their contribution to the field of study abroad). But Lily did much more than help me identify and assemble resources. For many years, she made the five hour bus ride from her apartment in Greenwich Village (in New York City) to the apple orchards and sheep pastures of Amherst, Massachusetts. She was the annual guest of honor and speaker at an enthusiastically attended and festive Study Abroad Night on the Hampshire campus. The next day, she met with students singly and in groups until she answered all their questions—or assured the rare student whose question she couldn't answer that she would go home and search through her box of index cards until she found the answer and get back to them through me. (During these daylong advising marathons, I mostly sat still and listened.)

Without her box of cards, Lily relied on the *New Guide to Study Abroad*, her own selection of U.S. programs abroad and courses open to U.S. students in overseas schools. Unfortunately, much of the information in the book soon went out of date and the book itself eventually went out of print. Before it did, I enlisted Lily's help to introduce a periodical guide to international educational opportunities so that we could systematically gather, update and share material on study, work and educational travel abroad. (I was interested in introducing students to all the ways to gain international experience and adults to ways to include an educational component in their travel.)

While some compiled lists of study abroad programs already existed, none, except Lily's *New Guide*, provided judgments about the quality of the programs—judgments that were largely implicit in what was left unsaid. One of the first things I did with *Transitions Abroad* was design an evaluation form and send it to all overseas program directors for their students fill out and return to me. I then edited the responses and printed my summaries in the magazine. The vol-

ume of responses and increasing unreliability of the sources meant I had to give up this part of the project. Lily, meanwhile, continued to write her own overview of programs: "Study Abroad Advisor."

After I abandoned my perhaps naïve attempt to evaluate programs through questionnaires, I turned to evaluating resources. In 1980, I published "Internships, Traineeships and Work-Study Experience Abroad: References and Resources." A few years later, I connected with a young man in Toronto, Jean-Marc Hachey, who was compiling a list of work abroad opportunities for Canadians. Hachey agreed to share his disks containing all that he had discovered. I could edit and add to them. I don't recall the name of the software, but for me it was a fantastic revelation! The first comprehensive guide to work abroad resources was published that year.

Other resource guides followed, including not only guides for undergraduate study abroad (already being assembled by other SECUSSANS), but ones to programs and resources for high school students, seniors, persons with disabilities, etc. Meanwhile, William Nolting, the Director of International Opportunities at the University of Michigan (this year's SECUSSA Chair-Elect), picked up on our *Work Abroad Resource Guide* and created a valuable set of handouts for his students on all types of overseas opportunities. From this evolved Bill's own extraordinarily rich web site [www.umich.edu/~icenter/overseas] and his selection and description of other important web sites for international educators and students. (*Work Abroad: The Complete Guide to Finding a Job Overseas*, edited by William Nolting and Susan Griffith and published by *Transitions Abroad*, now in its third edition).

Meanwhile, my work with *Transitions Abroad* had exactly the same purpose as my work as the faculty member responsible for international education at Hampshire College: to gather information on international education, evaluate it and share it. Communications technology made this possible to an extent that I could not have imagined when I entered the field in the 1970s. *Transitions Abroad* now maintains an active mailing list of nearly 30,000 organizations, divided into "Programs" and "Resources." Frequent mailings assure us that none of our information can be more than a few months old (much of it is up-

dated directly on the Internet by the organizations themselves).

By the early 1990s advisers had begun to use computers to track and communicate with students, and by the mid-1990s, as Bill Hoffa points out in his well-argued piece on "E-Mail and Study Abroad: The Pros and Cons of Travel and Living in Cyberspace" (in the January/February 1996 issue of *Transitions Abroad*), electronic technology played a central role in international education.

Simultaneously with its appearance as a major communication and tracking device, the Internet became a major marketing tool for program sponsors.

Mark Landon, who, with Mark Shay, started Studyabroad.com on Labor Day weekend 1995, recently told me that program directors as well as students loved the site from the beginning, and that there was little resistance from international education advisers to the use of the Internet as a marketing tool. If a potential client lacked a web site, Landon and Shay would create one for them at a nominal cost so that their sites could be linked to Studyabroad.com. At *Transitions Abroad*, although we never planned to sell banner advertising on our web site, a number of the magazine's advertisers insisted they wanted to be represented there. So we changed our minds.

Heather O'Conner, the Study Abroad Adviser at Bentley College, argues in the March/April 1999 issue of *Transitions Abroad* ("Marketing on the Internet: Using the Web to Sell Your Programs and Support Study Abroad") that promoting your own overseas programs and promoting international education go hand in hand. With a web site, program sponsors can reach a large and growing audience of students, parents and international educators without spending a fortune. Web sites can promote programs day and night and update as changes occur. In short, the Internet is a natural for promoting study abroad programs.

But is the Internet equally as valuable to advisers? In researching the article mentioned above, Hoffa received responses from 40 schools of all sizes and descriptions. Students at half of them reported that they already used the Internet to get information about where they were going, particularly by linking to the receiving school's web site. Once the possibility for students to do their own research existed, students apparently took full advantage of it.

Another respondent to Hoffa's survey, John Pearson at Stanford University, put it this way: Student access to overseas host institution information puts

them "ahead of their advisers (me!) in figuring all this out... We can't control this information anymore."

Pearson thinks this is good (or at least he did at that time). Others have reservations.

Kathleen Sideli, writing on "Technology and Study Abroad: Lessons I Have Learned," in the Fall 2000 issue of *International Educator*, describes five "ironies" associated with the uses of technology in international education advising. The first is that the more information the students have to choose from, the more they seem to resist absorbing any of it. The second, which follows from the first, is that schools have become so sophisticated in their ways of presenting information that students do not easily distinguish between quality and the lack of quality: "One effect of the rise of dot.coms has been that advisers have lost ground as the chief sources of information about programs. The obvious lesson here is that flashy web sites are not necessarily representative of the quality of a program. How do we ensure that students somehow get this message in time to save them from a costly error?"

In my own experience, we often don't get to students in time. Sometimes we may not get to them at all. Compared to my early years as an advisor, I found my last years much less satisfying. It was wonderful to be in instant e-mail contact with students who were in schools abroad where, by working together, the student and I had located the right match. It was also great to be able to talk directly with the on-site directors and hear their versions of what was happening with the students. In short, I found e-mail a boon to advising. But not web sites, not even our own. While modest, I thought our web site was pretty good (after all, I copied much of it from my neighbors down the road at the University of Massachusetts). I thought it communicated what needed to be said. But our students didn't seem to use it. Our message couldn't compete with those of dot.coms and fancier institutional web sites.

At the end of my tenure as international studies advisor, despite all the computers and databases and listservs with knowledgeable advisers standing by, I missed the early days when Lily von Klemperer sat beside me with her dog-eared copy of the *New Guide to Study Abroad* and answered students' questions. Obviously, she didn't know everything, but students trusted and believed her because she had done her research on the quality of the programs. Finally, lists of programs are only lists of programs, whether they're on my web site or someone else's, and the looks of a web site depends upon how much you can afford to spend to develop it.

After nearly 30 years as an advisor on international education, I agree with Kathy Sideli in the article mentioned above (and I'm glad a younger and much more technically proficient adviser than me said it): "Study abroad, although enhanced by technology, is basically a field with core objectives and results that remain virtually untouched by technology. . . .We have a long way to go before we know how to marshal the power of technology to enhance the academic and intercultural components of study abroad."