

**Transformation by Design:
An Indiana Sophomore's exposure to Rome**

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Abstract – Each summer a group of approximately thirty students from the Indiana Purdue Fort Wayne (IPFW) campus enroll for credit in a continuing education course offered in Rome, Italy. The course is advertised throughout the campus and by word of mouth as meeting the IPFW General Education requirement as well as an Architectural Technology department's technical elective.

The choice of Rome facilitates discussions variously emphasizing Art, Architecture, or Engineering and in the process informs students how intertwined these respective studies actually are. The Instructors vary but typically include an Architect/Engineer, an Art Historian, and a Landscape Architect. The course itself includes daily walking thru Rome focusing first on Republican, then Imperial, and finally Renaissance Rome.



Student feedback from participants is positive but is exceeded by the transformation that occurs in students who entered the program expecting only a technological education but find themselves infected with a persistent affinity for the subtleties of grand architecture, exemplary engineering, and fine art. The change in students is both obvious and enduring to the faculty who has them in courses when they return.

Index Terms – Continuing Education, Cross Cultural Experience, Diversity

Type of Course

Students at IPFW, as in most universities, have General Education Requirements that include Humanistic Thought and/or Creative and Artistic Expression. After many years work this two week course on Rome, Italy was accepted by the Fine Arts, Civil Engineering technology, and Architectural Engineering Technology departments as an acceptable course to fulfill either of the two mentioned areas of General Education (1).

How Advertised

The course was advertised by the Purdue, West Lafayette Continuing Education program as well as by posters and word of mouth at the IPFW campus. Because at least two of the three instructors each year were from IPFW and they taught courses to students in Art, Interior Design and Architectural History, the majority of students recruited were also from the IPFW campus.

However, because of word of mouth and significant poster campaigns there is always a significant minority (20%) of participants who take the program not because of its college credit, but rather because of “word of mouth” comment on its excellent reputation. It is not just another “if this is Thursday, that must be the Vatican” type of tour. Rather the program examines Rome through its many stages of development and decline while the students live day to day among Romans, a situation known to enhance the learning experience (2).

Course Objectives

Because of the General Education courses that this program fulfills, a broad historical, social, art and architectural perspective has to be presented to the students (3). An overview of the course includes three distinct parts. First, an examination of Early Republican Rome is used to describe fundamental patterns of urban establishment (ie. Why by the river, Why on the hills, etc). Next, imperial Rome provides a multitude of technically significant structures and systems with their accompanying and astonishing artistic embellishment highlighting the sophistication of Roman civilization. Lastly there is a presentation of Renaissance and Baroque art, architecture, and urban planning in Rome. Altogether, these rich and intertwined historical examples are what make Rome unique as an opportunity for a student to explore, discover and to consider many of their previous assumptions about the marriage of art, architecture and engineering

In addition to the study of Rome, occasional day trips are made to Pompeii, Tivoli, Hadrian’s Villa, and Florence to expose students to the regional variations of Roman-Italian influence.

Instructors

Because of the breadth of the program and the depth of Roman history, the required faculty would need to include an Architect/Engineer, an Art Historian, and a Landscape Architect in the group that would accompany the approximately thirty (30) participants.

I was the Architect in the group and brought considerable prior interest in ancient and Imperial Roman construction as well as several years experience with a water engineering firm. Furthermore, the Roman use of geometric construction for monumental design is a significant area of developing research for me.

The art historian for this trip was Samantha Birk who holds the double title of art history instructor at IPFW and assistant curator of the Museum of Fort Wayne.

Greg Pierceall is a professor of Landscape Architecture at Purdue University in West Lafayette

Assessments

Because students were going to receive college credit for this program, a number of projects were established in order to place some empirical validity on their grade. The most effective way to accomplish this, without unduly compromising the unique experience of actually being in Rome, was determined to be in presenting the students with a half-empty outline sheet that would suggest what part of our long digressions on the streets of Rome they might want to pay attention to and later visit on their own. This forced the students into a reasonable data collection mode in addition to their immersion in the experience of Rome.

At least every third day, students were required to give written responses to a question sheet the instructors would supply. This had the dual effect of having the students pay more attention than they might have otherwise done while it also forced them to rethink issues while there was still time for them to revisit that part of Rome. Grading was thus not too burdensome for the instructors and thereby kept them available to accompany groups of students wishing to investigate “the Rome of Romans after the tourists went to bed”.

The results from these assessments were better than are typically found in a classroom situation, but a realistic appraisal could predict this merely on the basis of Teacher/Student ratio.

Student Feedback

So, what do the students say about the quality of their learning experience? On paper there were the usual approvals (Rome’s awesome) along with the usual criticisms (visit fewer churches).

And though this empirical collection of responses and comments from the students is gets collected in course evaluations, it doesn’t tell the real story of many students’ visit to Rome.

When a student is able to step outside the Teacher/Student/Class perspective, such as at a café facing the Pantheon and exhausted after a long day of walking, the students comments can be enlightening irrespective of their performance in the course and an indication that a change in perception has occurred. It is also true that a few students were unable to step outside of the “them” that they brought to Rome and failed to make what I call the “transformation”.

What is this transformation? Are the students smarter? Do they work harder? Well, the answer to these academic questions is “maybe”. Maybe they know a whole lot more about differentiating the Renaissance from the Baroque. Maybe they can remember whether the Pantheon is early Republican or Imperial. But, these are just things they remember or hopefully understand. What I mean by transformation is seeing with a different brain, a paradigm shift.

What does this mean? Allow me to suggest a few insights.

A student who visits Rome will hardly ever miss his or her automobile. In fact, they might be horrified at the prospect of their having to drive a car where Roman teenagers never give a thought about driving their scooters.

A student who has been to Rome now knows that a toilet isn't necessarily out of place in a shower stall but rather is in fact an hygienic and low maintenance improvement over what is typical for Fort Wayne, Indiana (regardless of what a building inspector thinks)

A student who has been to Rome discovers that it doesn't matter how often you repeat a question or how loudly you ask for directions to the Circus Maximus, most Italians won't know you want to go to Circo Massimo.

A student in Rome will likely discover the pleasure of walking in Rome, stopping at a particular café chosen from many, being served food the like of which they didn't know existed, and being allowed to order wine even if they are not twenty-one yet still old enough to join the army.

These are but a few of the perspective shifts that a student can undergo when exposed to Rome for longer than a two-day tourist blitz, and is what I consider to be the most valuable education that a sophomore from Indiana can be lucky enough to receive.

Conclusion

The effects on students can be immense. One student described how he felt upon returning to Indiana as like “ having received an honor, something I will be proud of for the rest of my life”. Another student reflected that it was the “first time in her life that she had to consider why her way of thinking might not be just the only way, but maybe not even the best way”.

These students would probably have had a successful life even if they didn't visit Rome, and it certainly isn't true that all students who visit Rome will “transform”. But it is certain that many students will forever after look at their world differently from having been to Rome. And though this has been reported by others more thoroughly elsewhere, it bears repeating that the value of study abroad is above and beyond the actual subjects studied... even for engineers.

Notes and Bibliographic Information

- (1) A three credit hour course currently has approximately forty-five contact hours and is comparable to the more than fifty contact hours of the Rome program.
- (2) Academic study abroad : the long-term impact on alumni; Wallace, Darice Hastings
- (3) Rome : the biography of a city; Hibbert, Christopher

Biographical Information

D.J. Marshall is a Registered Architect and Assistant Professor in the Purdue Architectural Engineering Technology program at Fort Wayne, Indiana. His current area of research is Imperial Roman Geometric Construction techniques, specifically the Forum of Augustus and the Pantheon. He is occasionally privileged to accompany a group of students on their first visit to Rome.