

Critical Reflective Assignment

Elizabeth Snyder
MCEA/LD with EBD Certification
Graduation Date: August 2015

Special Education in Scotland
May 29th – July 11Th 2015

Support from UW-Eau Claire:
International Education: Study Abroad Scholarship for \$600

Critical Reflective Assignment

1. Provide an introduction and overview of your study abroad experience.

My study abroad experience was with the Special Education in Scotland program. Over the course of our six-week experience I spent time with my host family in the Orkney Islands, lived dorm style with my 16 peers in Aberdeen, and then traveled across the Highlands on a tour bus with my classmates, professor, and my husband. I felt very fortunate that I was able to experience and see so much of my host country in such a short time.

The first two weeks of my program were spent in the Orkney Islands living with my host family. Although my host family was British I was able to learn many things about the Orkney way of life, the history of the area, and taste traditional Scottish fare. Along with five other students I was also able to observe and work within a school setting that taught me many things about play, inclusion, holistic teaching, and the importance of flexibility. The third and fourth week of my program were spent in a city called Aberdeen located on the mainland of Scotland. Here I attended class with my peers and learned the theories behind the Scottish educational system. We also discussed the difference between American and Scottish schools and brain-stormed ways to implement positive practices we had observed at our host school, into our own future classrooms.

The final weeks of our trip were filled with traveling. I was fortunate enough to have my husband come and visit me for the final weeks of my program. I enjoyed exploring Edinburgh with him. It was so impactful to have a person from home come and take part in my experience. He was also able to join my group on our Highlands trip. Our five-day Highland trip consisted of amazing hikes, fantastic historical stories from our tour guide, a night at a traditional Scottish dance, and moments of great conversation between peers.

2. Using one to two examples, explain how your study abroad experience advanced your knowledge and understanding of the world's diverse cultures, environments, practices and/or values.

There were many differences that I noticed between my host country and the United States. I saw a diversity of culture, experienced different environments and also observed different practices and values. One value that I continually encountered was simplicity. The value of living life simply and less extravagantly than we often do in the United States was seen in all areas of my study abroad experience, but I observed it most closely with my host family in the Orkney Islands. I think that people in the Orkney Islands tend to live more simply for several reasons. The first is that the Orkney Islands are small, and access to each area is not always easy, so over the generations the residents have learned to make do with little. Transport to the islands is expensive so the grocery store did not carry every type of food known to mankind, people had fewer cars because they were difficult to buy and transport to the island and gas was very expensive, and the remoteness of the islands led to a separation from a quick paced life seen in the larger cities of Scotland. Secondly, the weather was cold, windy, and wet. When there was a ray of sunshine people were

out and about enjoying the weather. Their lives were not filled with technology, but rather they enjoyed and took advantage of the natural beauty of their islands, even in poor weather. Finally, in my travels I saw that living simply or with less seemed to be a European way of life. Appliances, cars, houses, roads, and shops were much smaller than in the United States.

However, while in Orkney I quickly learned that living simply did not mean an easier life. On the contrary, the smaller fridges meant that you went to the grocery store every other day; Sam's club was not an option. There were also no fast-food restaurants; I literally would need to fly or take a boat and then a significant car ride to arrive at the nearest McDonalds. Until arriving in Orkney I had not realized how saturated my life was with easy access to everything I could possibly want, but how lacking in simplicity that convenient life was. I had been confusing the terms convent and simple. In America we have created every invention to make life simpler, more comfortable, more accessible, and more convenient. But buying into that way of thinking can make a person more exhausted than fulfilled. My host family truly lived life. They ate simple foods, but enjoyed the flavors of each ingredient. We enjoyed taking walks without iPods, we read books by a fire, and we made the most of every opportunity whether it was taking a dingy across the North Sea in a rain storm, exploring an old tomb on the way home from school, petting a baby lamb, or just sitting and enjoying one another's company as it rained outside. As I truly reflect on the simple way of life I keep coming back to the root; the key to this type of life is the investment in people over things. It is the difference between immediate satisfaction and taking the time to build things that will last. I can't wait to incorporate this way of thinking into my future classroom, relationships, marriage, and life.

3. Describe how your study abroad experience has impacted your knowledge and understanding of global systems, institutions, and relationships of power?

Of global systems, institutions, and relationships of power, I felt that I learned that most about institutions during my time in Scotland, specifically the institution of education. As an educator I am very familiar with the institution of education in the United States, the similarities and differences between our education system and that of Scotland was very fascinating. Overall I learned, and relearned that many institutions are built on the same central idea or guiding principle. In education for instance, the purpose is to educate children so that they can succeed in the world. But I also learned that even when institutions start with the same core desire, the end result can be vastly different. Different countries can use the same institution, but solve a problem in a completely different way. Institutions tend to serve the same purpose from country to country; they provide structure and a vehicle to carry out ideas, beliefs, and values within the given context of that society. However, they are influenced by religion, politics, money, history, societies, and culture; so it is little wonder that the American education system looks vastly different from the Scottish system.

Critical Reflective Assignment

One of the major differences between education in the United States and Scotland is the drive for academic excellence. In the U.S. we are saturated with testing, scores, and academic interventions; Scotland is quite the opposite. While student teaching in the Eau Claire school district I gave the students a test (written) at least twice a week. While I was in the Orkney Islands I observed every single classroom, as did my five peers. At the end of two weeks, we discussed our observations and found that only one of us had seen a test being administered. We marveled at the lack of testing but then began to ask ourselves “But how do they measure progress?” “What are they counting as data?” “How can they say that this is effective if you can’t compare them to other nations?” It took a paradigm shift for us to see that in America tests require students to sit quietly and use a pencil on paper to prove knowledge. In Scotland teachers expect students to perform the skills and generalize the skill to a real life situation. Teachers observe student interactions, processes, and actions to determine if the child has learned the skill. In America learning equals a correctly filled in bubble, in Scotland learning is reached when a student applies their knowledge to life.

Both countries started with the same quest, but ended with vastly different results. Why? One of the main reasons is the standards for education that have been laid down by each country. The United States’ educational system is a carry over from British time. Teacher centered classrooms that create academically smart students have led us to create the Common Core Standards. The exhaustive set of standards allows for every type of pres-kill and builds on student’s previous knowledge to help them to reach academic success. The Scottish version of these standards is called the Curriculum for Excellence. The CfE also encourage academic success but there are also sections that require teachers to teach about religion, social skills, social justice, and life skills. The Common Core was born out of a political movement. It has been a well-meaning move that has helped teachers to align their curriculum and hold all students to a similar standard. The CfE came from the people of Scotland themselves. Every citizen was given the freedom to voice their opinion what they thought the educational system should look like, what should be taught, and how important each subject was to a student’s success. The preferences and opinions came from a nation that wanted to be separate from the UK, their educational institution deeply reflects this idea. In conclusion, I discovered that institutions that serve the same purpose can be very different based on their context. I was also able to see the benefits and detriments of both systems. I can’t wait to take away the idea of holistic teaching and alternative testing to my future classroom and school district.

4. Identify and describe how a decision (or lack of a decision) made by people in your home community or country has impacted your host community or country. Or, if you prefer, identify and describe how a decision/lack of a decision made by people in your host community/country has impacted your home community/country.

Last year Scotland took a vote to become independent from the United Kingdom. Scotland wanted to become their own country. After a long campaign and a very

close vote; Scotland remained a part of the United Kingdom. Although the vote came down to no, this decision did have an impact on the United States because it allowed us to keep the status quo, of negotiating and working with the United Kingdom. Had Scotland voted yes, the United States would have been impacted more. Based on my readings for class and conversations with my host family and other Scots, I learned that the United States would be impacted politically, financially, and relationally with other nations, if the vote had been yes. Although it has been over a year since the vote was taken, emotions are still running high in Scotland and the talk of a future vote is in the air; within the next decade the following may very well impact America.

One thing that I knew before going to Scotland was that it is part of the United Kingdom, and the UK is one of our political allies. If Scotland were to succeed from the UK they may or may not remain the allies of the US. As the UK and Scotland negotiate terms, the US would have difficulty relying on them in a crisis because the wealth and military power of the countries would be divided and the political focus would be on the separation of the countries and not outwards. Secondly, Scotland is oil rich. If they were to separate from England, the United States would need to renegotiate trading with Scotland and the UK depending on who would control the oil. The oil market would fluctuate which could impact Americans on a daily basis as they fill up their cars, travel by plane and go about their daily lives. Finally, we do not know how Scotland would work with the European Union. They may join or they may not. Either way the United States would be impacted because of the relations it has with the European Union. It would be harder to come to conclusions with another country, but not having Scotland in the EU could lead to its disintegration because one more European country is not part of the EU, or the EU could bully Scotland into making certain political moves because the majority of the countries are part of the Union. On a smaller and more personal scale, SPED in Scotland might be more difficult to arrange. We learned that Scotland has been tightening its borders already in the wake of this vote, and that it is difficult for people from all nations, including the United States, to become citizens or gain visas in Scotland.

5. Explore how your study abroad experience has impacted your professional or career goals or aspirations. What skills did you develop or enhance during your study abroad experience that might be transferable or beneficial in your future workplace?

Studying abroad has always been something I have wanted to do; this experience has only served to fuel my love of travel, education, and new experiences just as I thought it would. It has also encouraged me to be more physically active, live a more simple life and incorporate more play and holistic teaching into my classroom. Now that I am at home I have added more walking and hiking into my lifestyle and have also encouraged my husband to do the same. We are also reevaluating our lives and looking at how we can live more simply. As of this week we have gone through almost every item in our house, deciding if it truly adds or detracts from our life, it has been like giving our lives a spring cleaning.

Critical Reflective Assignment

Integrating a healthier and fulfilling lifestyle has definitely changed my day to day goals and perceptions; but I also had a paradigm shift about myself as an educator. At Glaitness School I encountered a word that is often seen as a no no in the American school system, play. The playground of Galitness School looks different from other playgrounds, there is a soccer court and sandpit, a very tiny jungle gym, an interesting wall of interactive materials, and a very large shed. The shed is filled with scraps or recyclables. During recess the students used the scraps in the shed to enhance their imaginative play. The teachers do not say “no” or “that is dangerous.” Instead they ask questions that encourage the students to problem solve such as “how could you make that better or safer?” As the students play they build negotiation, problem solving, and social skills. They practice being creative and imaginative which only enhances their problem solving skills both outside and inside the classroom.

I learned that the students were not always so fabulous at play. The school actually had to teach students how to play and interact with one another because technology had taken the place of human interaction. The results were students who could carry on conversations with eye contact and probing questions, students who solved their own problems in the classroom, students who were able to solve math problems in several different ways or write very descriptive stories. This concept of play permeated each classroom and brought an excitement for learning and interacting. This is what I want to capture and bring into my own classroom, the concept of play. Not only into my classroom but also my own life. By modeling the ability to let loose and engage in interactions with other humans and enjoy life I hope to inspire this same spirit in my students. I was recently hired to teach 6th grade and have already begun creating plans for how to incorporate play and creativity into my lessons. I plan to take my students outside for some lessons, allow them to act out math problems, and encourage them to interact with students from other grade levels.

6. Study abroad can be a transformative learning experience, in which students learn more about themselves and the world in which they live.
- Describe a disorienting dilemma you experienced while abroad and why you found it disorienting.
 - Describe how the dilemma challenged your previous knowledge of the world’s cultures, environments, practices, or values.
 - Explain how the dilemma helped you to understand how your decisions and the decisions of others have global implications.

One disorienting experience that occurred while I was overseas was with my host father, Steve. Steve loved to take walks and explore the islands; it felt like everyday we were on a new adventure. My friend Morgan and I would tramp around the island in our rain boots, hats, mittens and scarves, following him like little ducklings. The environment itself was disorienting, I was wearing winter gear in the middle of summer, bopping about an island with no trees, and walking by an ocean that

looked like an advertisement for a Californian beach. During our adventures I began to notice something, the paths that Steve took us on often went over fences or went through fields. I assumed that these were just local paths on government land until on afternoon. We had just finished school and were still in our dress pants when Steve pulled the car over, pointed to an island with a tidal cause way and said, "I've always wanted go there, put on your gear." As I pulled on the needed clothes I looked over at the island. There was a house, animal pens, and three gates between the island and us.

We walked across the tidal causeway and came to the first gate. It was locked, but Steve just climbed over it and kept going. Morgan and I exchanged glances and followed him, assuming he knew the inhabitants of the property. This continued for the next few gates. I began to feel nervous and queasy. My experience with trespassing is limited and I tend to enjoy following rules, avoiding conflict, and walking on predetermined and safe paths. As we approached the house Steve informed us that he would knock on the door to see if anyone was home; maybe we can have some tea he mumbled as he pounded on the door. No one answered. Rather than leave, Steve decided we should explore the island by first climbing through a barbwire fence into a sheep pasture, through the sheep pasture to the cows and chickens and under another barbed wire fence to walk in the beach by the North Sea. Every nerve in me was nervous, the barbed wire, the livestock, and the clear violation land rights completely disoriented me. Later when I asked Steve's wife Jenny if he was in the habit of trespassing, she explained a concept called roaming rights to Morgan and I.

In Scotland no one is allowed to keep people off their property except royals and those that need security. Everyone is free to roam the land. You clearly can't destroy other' property, but the land and land ownership was a fluid concept. People technically owned the land and paid taxes, but it was generally agreed that land was not something that was owned, but rather used, and should be used by all. I could not wrap my head around this concept. The American dream is all about ownership of land our great manifest destiny. Sue them and shoot them seems to be our battle cry. Ownership of land is what America and many other nations have been built upon, but in Scotland that is not the case. Fences are not built to keep people out but rather to keep animals in. I think that this tradition reflected the relational values of the Scottish people. It is a land built on clans who survived by banding together and using the land rather than separating and fending for themselves. On a more global scale this interaction helped me to see how the perception of land ownership has led to so many quarrels, wars, and death. The choice to see land as something to possess has had a great impact on our world. It has led to the disintegration of many indigenous people. This whole experience has made me wonder what the world would look like if we were able to adapt this idea of living relationally on the land as opposed to separating and claiming the land.

7. Finally, please attach two pictures, with captions, that illustrate what was important and

Critical Reflective Assignment

meaningful about your experience.



This is a picture of some of the children playing at Glaitness School in the Orkney Islands. At this school students were taught how to play using a scrap story, a shed full of recyclables. Students worked on problem solving skills, conflict resolution, using their imaginations, and having fun without technology. Watching the students play gave me a paradigm shift about the purpose of education, and the need for play in the classroom.

Critical Reflective Assignment



This is a picture of myself (right) and two of my friends. One has been my friend since our first semester of classes; we were able to graduate together and then take this trip. This trip allowed us to grow closer as individuals and as educators. The second girl in the picture (left) was a new friend who I made on this trip. We had never met before but after one night of conversation we learned that we had many things in common and formed a strong bond. The friendships that I deepened and started on this trip made the whole experience so worthwhile.

This picture is also meaningful to me because we had completed a difficult three-hour hike, something I was afraid of before coming to Scotland, and I felt healthy, happy, and successful.