

# Study Abroad Critical Reflection

*Marburg, Germany: Spring 2015*

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

My name is Anneli Williams and I am currently pursuing a German and Geography Double Major at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. During the spring semester of 2015, I studied abroad in Marburg, Germany as a participant in the Intensive German Studies Program (IGSP). While there, I took part in three intensive language courses as well as completed a five month internship at the Deutscher Sprachatlas Forschungszentrum, a research center which collects, analyzes and maps regional German dialects.

## ***UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD'S DIVERSITY***

When I first looked into the Intensive German Studies Program in Marburg, I was admittedly disappointed to hear that only international students took part in all of the language courses. However, as a result of my diverse classmates, I was able to learn far more than German grammar during class time.

For example, my class recently decided to organize a summer potluck. When trying to pick a suitable date, multiple students immediately mentioned that it must be before the 18<sup>th</sup> of June. Most of the class was confused by these exclamations, with my teacher even jokingly remarking, "What could possibly be so important about June 18<sup>th</sup>?" The answer is that Ramadan begins on June 18<sup>th</sup> this year. Four out of the sixteen students in my class are Muslim and as such will fast from 3am until 10pm for a month to commemorate the holiday.

Later on, I was eating lunch at the cafeteria with one of these classmates, and I asked him more about the meaning of Ramadan. He explained the idea behind the concept: for the month of Ramadan, every person regardless of wealth or status feels exactly the same. During our hour together, I learned an incredible amount about the practices which surround Ramadan and Islam as a religion. In a society where foreign religions and cultures are often negatively illustrated in the media or simply unknown to much of the general population, I think there is nothing more illuminating or humanizing than honest conversations with real people.

## ***GLOBAL SYSTEMS, INSTITUTIONS, & RELATIONSHIPS OF POWER***

As a geography major, I have studied the relationships between first and third world countries through textbook readings, however, my time abroad allowed me to examine these relationships first hand. My language classes were full of students from China, Cameroon, Syria, and everywhere in between; I was often the only American student. Outside of the occasional semester exchange student, the majority of these students are completing language classes to be able to study at a German university, with their visas being contingent upon the continual passing of courses. Most of them will also have to take another year of general education courses at the Studienkolleg, as their high school diplomas are not recognized by Germany. For some students, even reaching Germany is an obstacle due to the state of their home country or its relations with Germany.

For example, one of my Syrian classmates explained the struggles facing those from his country who attempt to study in Germany. Due to the instability of the country, Syrian banks are not currently recognized by Germany, making the process of achieving a visa incredibly more difficult. According to him, in order to attain a German visa, an applicant needs to have a bank account in Germany. However, opening a bank account must be done in person in Germany, which is impossible to do without first receiving a visa. As a result, my classmate said that a "black market" run by Syrians currently living in Germany helps other Syrians to organize all of the legalities of their move. While he said the process has become easier as increasingly more Syrians flock to Germany, I was still stunned by the nature of the problem.

Although I have always realized that my knowledge of English and status as an American citizen grant me freedoms and opportunities beyond those offered in less developed areas, I realized these advantages in more clarity while abroad. As an American, I am privileged with ease of communication, a less complex visa process as well as recognition of my academic credentials and my bank accounts while abroad. Relationships between governments and countries may seem distant at times, however, they do influence our daily lives.

## **HOST COMMUNITY'S IMPACT ON HOME COMMUNITY**

In their decision of committal to renewable and sustainable energy, Germany greatly impacts not only the USA, but also the world as a whole. The environmentally friendly practices in Germany are built into the infrastructure of daily life, visible in the plethora of affordable and dependable public transportation options and the "Pfand" (deposit) system of recycling bottles. A driver's license in Germany costs around 2000 Euro, while a semester ticket giving students free access to all forms of public transportation in the state of Hessen costs around 200 Euro. Solar fields and wind turbines are interspersed amidst the Wisconsin-esque rolling farmlands.

Most obviously, these "green" efforts affect the United States through improving the quality of the environment we share globally. However, as Germany plays an increasingly important role as a European leader, its influence upon the USA also increases. At the recent G7 convention hosted by Angela Merkel, the richest world leaders made commitments to reduce carbon emissions in the coming years. If the USA continues to make strides towards using clean energy and reducing climate change, the results will be not only beneficial to Americans, but also to citizens all over the world. It is my hope that Germany will continue to pressure, challenge and successfully influence the USA to adapt more environmentally friendly practices.

## **FUTURE ASPIRATIONS**

My study abroad experience has largely impacted my future aspirations. Though I had always enjoyed my German courses in the USA, I had never considered possibly using my language abilities in future educational or professional pursuits. Before leaving for Germany, I posed my semester abroad as a challenge of sorts to myself. As such, I decided I would try to learn as much German as possible, hopefully in the process figuring out if I could seriously consider the language as a career option. Additionally, I set up an internship at the Deutscher Sprachatlas Forschungszentrum with the help of my professor, hoping to gain a glimpse of the German business world.

By the end of my first month in Germany, my interest in the language and culture was escalating. After passing my first exams, I realized I could complete the Studienkolleg (the local university's language school) sequence of courses, achieving official certification to study later on at an actual German university. After discussing my options with my professors at UWEC and my advisors abroad, I decided achieving this certification would be invaluable, providing me not only with official proof of my language abilities, but also with the possibility of completing a Master's Program in Germany.

As a result, I am currently completing the final course at the Studienkolleg. I hope to successfully complete the course and then apply for Master's Programs in Germany this coming winter. Though I also plan to apply for Master's Programs in the USA, the offer of free tuition and promise of further language learning are extremely appealing.

Regardless whether I decide to return to Germany for schooling, I have developed many transferrable skills through my studies and internship, namely my communication and problem-solving abilities. The former is readily seen in the improvement of my German language skills, which greatly increases my employment options both in the USA and abroad. However, beyond these literal language skills, I learned much about the art of communicating between cultures. This knowledge is unquantifiable and develops while simply conversing with others, working towards the goal of understanding, not judging. Over meals in the cafeteria and in-class debates alike, topics such as marriage equality, mass data collection, or the refugee situation in Germany provided fodder for discussion and understanding of varying viewpoints.

Furthermore, living abroad has fostered my sense of independence and ability to adapt, in turn improving my problem-solving skills. Far away from my hometown of 21 years, I have been forced to handle situations such as opening a German bank account or navigating a Belgian public transportation system on my own, in another language. Though challenging at the time, such accomplishments have undoubtedly increased my confidence in myself. While I am uncertain of my future career path, I am certain that the strides I have made in my communication and problem-solving skills will aid in me in being a capable and successful employee.

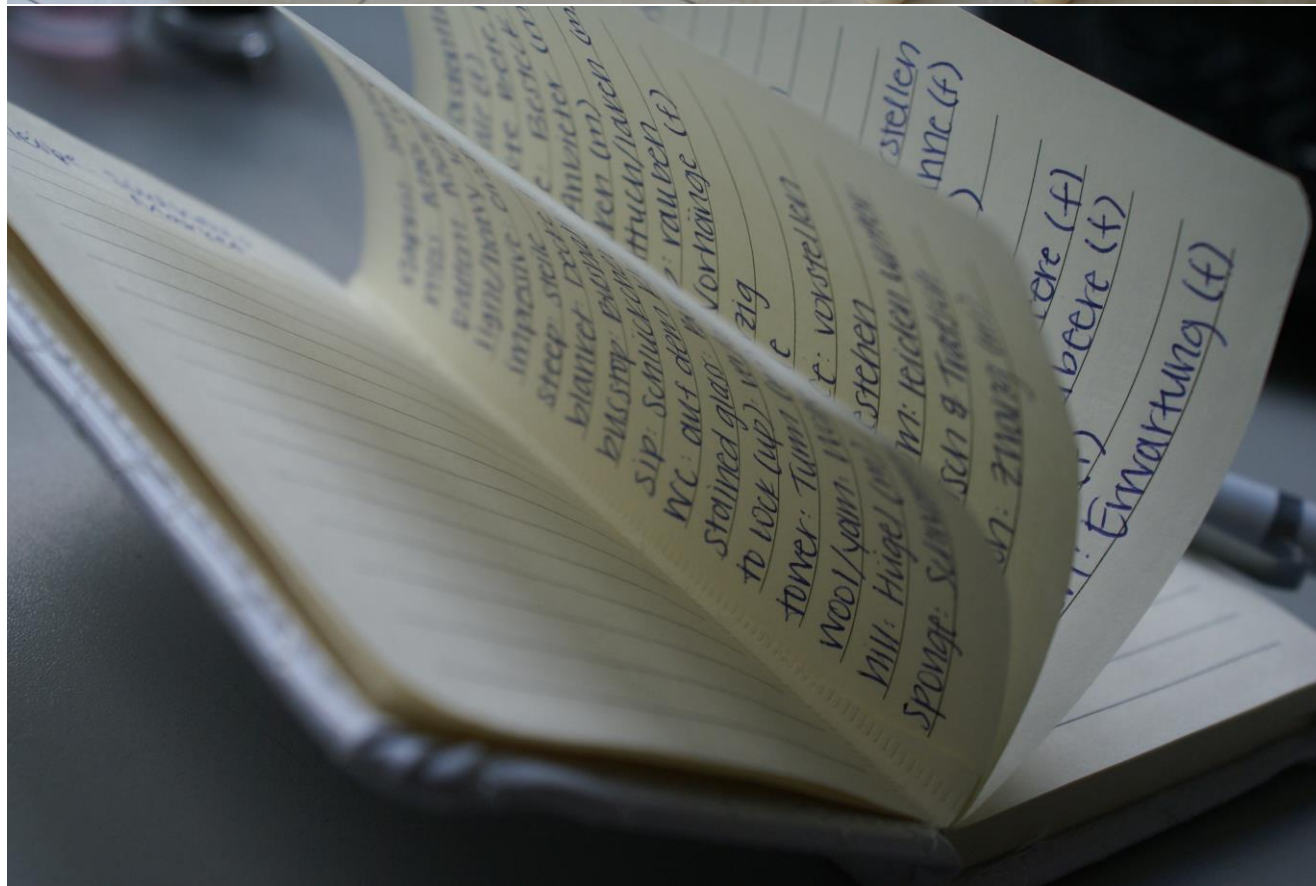
## ***DISORIENTING DILEMMA***

While waiting in line to purchase a thank you card at Woolworth's, I watched a discomforting situation unfold between the cashier and a customer. The customer was an older woman who quite obviously didn't speak, read, or write any German, and she was trying to negotiate the return of one item and the purchase of another. The cashier was very impatient and rude, speaking in a demeaning tone and throwing knowing looks at the other customers in line, myself included.

This experience was disorienting in comparison with all of the overwhelming positivity towards immigrants and minorities I had seen in Germany. Marburg itself is an extremely liberal university town covered with spray painted anti-discrimination messages of "Refugees Welcome!" Although I knew discrimination still occurred, it was especially jarring to see it happen before my eyes to a woman the age of my grandmother.

Afterwards, I spent the afternoon thinking about the treatment of foreigners in Germany. While unfortunate happenings such as the aforementioned situation still do occur, I believe that the country on the whole is making a huge effort to accommodate newcomers, as seen in offerings of language and integration courses as well as the granting of asylum for many people in crisis, particularly from Syria. Decisions on both a large and small scale, from interactions at Woolworth's to countrywide legislation, are incredibly important in creating and maintaining a climate of tolerance.

## PICTURES



*Picture 1:* This is a picture of an art exhibit at the Museum for Communication in Frankfurt, Germany. The telephone “sheep” embody the feeling of language immersion I experienced while abroad: the more language I learned, the more the words and ideas seemed to come alive!

*Picture 2:* This is a picture of my vocabulary notebook I started during my first week in Germany. Though I didn’t notice at the time, the main word in focus here is “Erwartung,” which means expectation. In January, I quite literally couldn’t put my expectations for my semester abroad into words; however, I believe this lack of preconceptions allowed me to be more open to new experiences.