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Learning while traveling: The school of travel

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand more about learning during travel experiences and how this impacts one's view of the world, home, and self. This sample consisted of twenty participants who went on ninety-eight trips within four to twelve months spending approximately 8616 euros. These twenty students filled out a questionnaire of their travel experiences while participating in an educational and travel experience for one year called Erasmus. In addition these twenty participants met together to discuss their travel sojourns, and eventually they confirmed the study's findings through a focus group. The study revealed that learning during travel experiences was encouraged by mundane aspects of travel, such as negotiating the details of how to travel, gaining information about different cultures, seeing places for the first time, and interacting with other travelers.

1. Introduction and literature

There can be a significant amount of learning that takes place during one's free time. One of the most popular preferences of free time is travel. This research focuses on learning during one's travel experience. Travel for pleasure as well as education has increased in general across the globe especially in places that are considered safe (Stone & Petrick, 2013). Both independent budget travel (O'Reilly, 2006) and formal educational travel such as study abroad are on the rise. The combination of these two patterns creates a 'perfect storm' for a tirade of budget travel from country to country with new friends.

The Erasmus Programme (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) is a European Union (EU) student exchange programme established in 1987. Among universities cooperating in the programme, students have freedom of academic mobility, being able to attend any given participating school for a semester or a year. This study explores the experiences of participants in the Erasmus Programme who also identified themselves as "budget travelers."

Previous literature has sought to characterize budget travelers, and to some degree, to consider the types of learning that take place during their journeys. Sorenson's (2003) study gives the reader insight as to the makeup and description of a budget traveler. Defying stereotypes of drifters, many backpackers are traveling for genuine and more authentic experiences (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995). They will take advantage of any available source to gain reliable information, especially the internet and guide books. Tsauro, Yen, and Chen (2010) research indicated independent tourists demonstrate several skills such as onsite tourism capability, pre-trip preparation, and emergency response. Independent tourists are moving in a small group, they must think for themselves, and they often will take risks during their trip. This forces them to concentrate in different ways than tourists who are following a tour guide. Tsauro et al. (2010) also showed, similar to Pearce and Foster (2007), how people who are traveling problem solve and use interpersonal and social skills. These travelers are learning unlooked for skills, especially that of solving problems, managing time, communication, and management of finances – all beneficial to many of their likely future endeavors. Scarinci and Pearce (2012) also

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discussed this educational component of tourism. Similar to [Pearce and Foster \(2007\)](#), they saw how travel positively influenced independence, being open-minded, and feeling comfortable around different types of people.

Some travelers have a more formal learning intention than others. Aside from institutionalized educational programs like study abroad and Erasmus, dark tourism is an example of tourism behavior that is often overtly geared toward learning, generally about the history of particular places. [Cohen \(2011\)](#), for example, discussed how an educational dimension may help distinguish meaningful dark tourism experiences from recreational ones. But travel need not have a formal educational motive in order to be educational in its outcomes.

[Falk, Ballantyne, Packer, and Benckendorff \(2011\)](#), as well as [Stone and Petrick \(2013\)](#), have called for more research on learning during travel, pointing out how travel is an often overlooked component of education. Travel and studying can foster intellectual and personal growth, intercultural awareness, foreign language acquisition, and professional development. As [Falk et al. \(2011, p. 920\)](#) argue, “The learning experiences offered as part of tourism and leisure activities can be a natural and enjoyable part of the total experience. Learning experiences are by nature personal, memorable and transformative, and thus are likely to contribute both to visitor's satisfaction with their experience, and their general quality of life.” Agreeing with other research, [Pearce \(2005\)](#) has argued that the main motives of travel are escape, relaxation, experiencing novelty, and building relationships. Perhaps there is value in exploring travel as an educational experience through this kind of framework. The current trend seems to be that the niches of study abroad and budget travel are collapsing on each other to an important degree. Rather than focusing on “educational travel” per se, and isolating it from travel experiences pursued for more mainstream motives like those noted by Pearce, exploring a programme like Erasmus can help us to broaden our perspective on educational tourism and to consider the types of learning that take place when traditional travel motives are overlaid with a more formal educational experience.

2. Method

The purpose of this study was to understand more about learning during travel and how this impacts one's view of the world, trust, home, and self. A similar project focused on older adults, whereas this study focuses on a younger generation. This sample consisted of twenty Erasmus participants who went on ninety-eight trips (in 4–12 months) spending approximately 8616 euros.

These twenty students filled out a questionnaire of their travel experiences while participating in an educational and travel experience for one year. In addition these 20 students met together over twelve occasions to discuss their experiences, and confirmed the findings below. The questionnaire, described in more detail below, asked the travelers about their experience and what they learned. Six months later, four of the participants joined a focus group, which confirmed and further added to the findings. All participants agreed to be a part of this research by formally giving consent. [Scarinci and Pearce \(2012\)](#) discuss the value of learning as a result of multiple trips. They encourage researchers to learn more about those who are traveling many times. My sample had also participated on multiple trips. These freely chosen and frequent trips allowed the participants to continue to learn more in-depth about travel. This extensive time in the field of travel produced an eager learner/traveler.

At the beginning of this project, the participants in this study answered questions asking them to list each trip they had taken and to specify the number of nights per trip, how many people they traveled with, how much money they spent, what their best memory and worst memory of each trip was, and what the most significant ‘thing’ that they learned on that trip was. This initial information helped to provide context. It is summarized in [Table 1](#).

After providing this initial information, the participants were asked to specifically focus on four questions, drawn from another research project ([Roberson, 2003](#)) on learning during travel. The previous study had focused on older adults, whereas this study centered on university students. These questions were as follows:

1. What did you learn about yourself?
2. What did you learn about the globe – the culture and the geography of the world?

Table 1
Summary of travel experience.

Where did you travel?	Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Bulgaria, Turkey
Total Number of Nights	118
Number of people you traveled with	1 – 40
Best Memory (These are the actual words of the participants, each person separated by a comma).	“Travel with Friends, First time experiences seeing sights - (Auschwitz, Charles Bridge, Budapest), Various spontaneous events in new places (unplanned for concert in a castle), Finding things I loved (especially music venue for young).”
Worst Memory	“Challenge of group dynamics during travel, Disorganization during the travel, Penalty or fine from authorities, Conflicts about where to go, Waiting for transportation, Difficulty in weather, Financial frustration, Crowded hostel, Losing or misplacing something, Garbage, Getting lost, Sickness, Too much noise from others.”
Significant Things Learned	“How to travel and how to use a map, How to get around a new place, Travel in a small group instead of a large one, Make a balance between spontaneous and planned events, Learning the history of new places, That people can be trusted and to return something lost, Traveling alone is also interesting and gives one many more opportunities, That in many places people enjoy life without alcohol, How to handle bad weather, We can learn about ourselves.”

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