

Teaching Students to Fly:  
Faculty-Designed Study Abroad in the Czech Republic

by

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**Abstract:** Reflecting on teaching and participating in a course that traveled abroad during spring break, 2011, professors and students share their insights to promote faculty-designed study abroad. The article explains how the course was designed to facilitate students learning how to create connections between lived experiences and texts, whether they are history or literature.

**Key Terms:** study abroad, Czech Republic, Czech history, Czech literature

Advertisements for pre-packaged, often touristy study abroad programs fill the mailboxes and inboxes of professors and other educators. These programs do not always fit the intellectual goals and financial needs of educators and students, particularly non-traditional adult students and first-generation college students, and yet all students deserve an opportunity to experience a foreign country in a meaningful way. Creating a meaningful relationship with a foreign country, region, or city usually requires students to study and spend a lot of time there. Nevertheless, when time is constrained to roughly six weeks of class followed by ten days of spring break followed by another six weeks of class, faculty can enrich the global experience through course design that creatively and intricately integrates classroom study with travel abroad.

In the spring 2011 semester we had the opportunity to be creative in teaching and leading a class from Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minnesota, to the Czech Republic.<sup>1</sup> Our students were all members of TRiO, a federal program designed to

increase educational opportunities for disadvantaged students; most were first generation college students who had never travelled abroad (or even outside of Minnesota). It was a challenge to design a course with different academic parts that worked together and complemented each other in different weeks and continents. The devil is in the details, as they say. We designed the course to consist of three main parts: six to seven weeks of studying Czech history and literature and preparing students for being students abroad (some students had never been on an airplane); ten days of traveling overseas (we refer to this portion of the class as the “global experience”); and the remainder of the class, back home, helping students to reflect and produce written work. The details were the numerous ways we attempted to remind students, sometimes subtly, sometimes not so subtly, of what they had studied and learned in the first part. Our mantra throughout the semester was that we were traveling to the Czech Republic as students and not as tourists; we sought to enrich classroom work through the global experience and to make the global experience more complex and rewarding because of classroom work. By recounting some of these details and showcasing the observations of two students, Nicole Mariska and Lori Yang, in the two essays below, we hope to offer inspiration to other instructors contemplating designing and leading a study abroad course.

### **Preparing Students to be Students Abroad**

Our texts provided a foundation of knowledge that shaped and informed the global experience. When choosing the assigned texts for the course, we maintained a simple yet strict rule: the history and the literature had to complement each other. Each of the seven weeks leading up to the global experience would focus on both disciplines so that connections could be consistently made between history and fiction.<sup>2</sup> We wanted

students to develop a rich and meaningful understanding of Czech culture by contemplating the complex relationships between historical events and fictional representations of Czech life and identity. Week after week, the class discussed Czech history and literature from the Middle Ages to the present. Mythology, legends, and works of fiction mixed every week with history; we read chapters from Hugh Agnew's *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown* alongside "Wycliffite Woman," *The Metamorphosis*, *Closely Watched Trains*, and other fictional works. One work of fiction written in 1940 captured the complement of legend and history we sought, along with students' imaginations (several students wrote about it in one assignment or another, and Lori Yang discusses it in her essay). František Langer wrote "The Sword of St. Wenceslas" to inspire Czechs to endure Nazi occupation by transforming the legend of the sword of St. Wenceslas to suit modern circumstances. Instead of St. Wenceslas magically finding the sword in Charles Bridge, the sword reveals itself to Czech children so that they can keep it safe from Nazis who might "search the bridge from end to end" to find it.<sup>3</sup> The story's nationalism and invocation of history and mythology such as St. Wenceslas and the Knights of Blaník challenged students to think critically about what they were learning and reading. The Charles Bridge features prominently in any visitor's itinerary in Prague, and, thus, the story is an excellent illustration of how students made connections among history, literature, and their global experience.

As eventful as Czech history is, not every step taken in the Czech Republic would be on as nationalistically sacred stones as Charles Bridge. A story by Jindřiška Smetanová, called "American Heating, Josef Vrkoč, Vinohrady"<sup>4</sup> emphasizes that objects and places do not need to be associated with dramatic legends and circumstances to hold

meaning; there is beauty in the little noticed and routine life in Prague. In the story, an American tourist from Texas, presumably traveling in the 1960s, wants to bring back an artifact from Prague and meets an astute denizen who shows her two objects that gather importance as people touch them every day: a door handle in the shape of a kitten's paw at 9 Lázeňská street and the bollards by the staircase leading from Charles Bridge to Kampa island. Both are polished day after day by passersby and would lose all value if some "collector" were to remove them from Prague. The tourist, not quite understanding the lesson, needs to be shown yet another "object": a perfect view through a round gable window from a high attic. Still not comprehending the Prague denizen's point – namely, that the only authentic collection is that which remains in context – the tourist spots a potbelly stove with "American Heating, Josef Vrkoč, Vinohrady" stamped on it and takes it back to Texas. The stove, too, however, only has meaning while it resides in its natural environment for, as the author drives the lesson home, it warmed a family reunion of a few American troops and their Czech relatives at the end of the Second World War with "glowing coke [shining] through the mica windows." Nevertheless, the tourist takes the stove to Texas where she "will install a red light in the stove and stereo recording of burning coke" to simulate the authentic experience.<sup>5</sup>

"American Heating" demonstrates a lesson that we wanted to pass along to students: only by first studying a place's culture and then going to that place, touching hand-worn objects and viewing the city from common vantage points, only by observing how places and things and people give meaning to each other, could the students understand how experience and physical context make our studies more authentic and how studying a place makes its objects and landscapes and cultures more meaningful.

Nicole Mariska's attached essay reminds us of the story's lesson and of the study and time it takes to recognize and respect the sanctity of a culture's artifacts. Knowledge of the connection between cultural identity, history, and the physical objects and spaces of Prague was the key difference between travelling as students and as tourists, and we tried to use our readings to understand and explore this distinction in the weeks leading up to the global experience.

We designed our pre-travel assignments to help students make connections between historical and literary texts and to be both guided and flexible enough to accommodate students' individual interests. Before leaving for the global experience, students completed a short essay and two entries in journals. The short essay provided a foundation for the themes and ideological intersections that they would be asked to explore in more depth during their travel and in their final research papers. Students were asked to combine history and literature to discuss one chosen thematic relationship: mythology and history, people and landscape, or people and institutions. The assignment required synthesis and comparison, bringing together multiple texts in service of a unique argument. The three thematic options accommodated various student interests while directing students to explore specific and complex issues relevant to both history and literature.

Students were also asked to write their journals before travel began in order to provide a more continuous development of ideas before, during, and after the global experience. Two of the journal entries were due before leaving the country; these entries were about their expectations for travel and their plans for investigating particular themes while abroad. The students' early journal entries, perhaps more than we wanted them to,

demonstrated the anxieties of new travelers concerned about the logistics of flying, exchanging money, and feeling unsure of what to expect. These two entries were essential not only for establishing a plan of inquiry that would extend across the ocean but also for allowing the instructors to give students specific feedback on how to make their entries more detailed and more intellectually rigorous.

### **The Global Experience**

Packing, boarding an airplane, exchanging money, navigating a subway system, communicating with people in a new language, eating unfamiliar food, and walking through a bustling city were all new experiences for many of our students. One of our greatest challenges was to support students in these logistical concerns while also fostering a continuous focus on intellectual exploration. We were students, not tourists, and we sought to bring our classroom work to bear on our global experience and to use our global experience to enhance our study of the history and literature of the Czech Republic.

The journal assignment was essential for providing connections between the hallways of the university and the streets of Prague. For this purpose, we tried to direct students away from viewing the journal as a diary for recording daily events and toward seeing the journal as a way of reflecting on evolving insights about the history and literature of the Czech Republic. Students were given specific prompts that asked them to locate and write about locations that were central in the fiction and literature that they read before the global experience. Students could choose from a list of locations and items that included such objects as “the door handle on the wooden door at Lázeňská 9 (in the Lesser Town, near Kampa)” (a reference to the story “American Heating”) and

“the stairs going down to Kampa from Charles Bridge” (a reference to both of the stories discussed above). We asked students to write *in situ* so that they would be looking at the location or object while ruminating on “the historical and/or literary significance of the location or object.” Eight journal entries had to be completed on site before we left the Czech Republic so that the students had their journals during the entire global experience to help them to think more deeply and shape travel as it occurred. The journals ended up being one of the most successful elements of the course and truly reflected the students’ careful thinking about the global experience as it unfolded.

The journal assignment likely ended up being successful because the prompts were specific yet flexible. Students could choose from a list of questions for four of the journal entries and from a list of locations and objects for the other four journal entries. The latter list served a second purpose that also may have contributed to the quality of the journals. The second purpose was an optional photo hunt, one of the ungraded challenges we designed to keep students thinking analytically about what they were seeing and experiencing while in the Czech Republic. Students wanted to take pictures and all of them had digital cameras,<sup>6</sup> so the photo hunt was a way to make it rewarding to take pictures of historically significant locations and to remember later what was in the photos. We combed the readings for a list of twenty-eight items—places, buildings, statues, and objects—located in Prague. We assigned a different number of points for each item depending on how difficult it was to find. So, for example, a relatively accessible location such as the stairs from Charles Bridge to Kampa was worth only “jedna” (one) point while the door handle on the wooden door at Lázeňská 9 was worth “pět” (five) points because we were not entirely sure that it existed as described in the

story and might be difficult to find. Locations farther afield, such as Bilá Hora (White Mountain) and Letohrádek Hvězda (Star Castle), required figuring out how to transfer from the Metro (subway) to the trams. We scheduled free time for searching for these locations or other self-guided activities to encourage students to learn how to travel independently. Whoever could earn the most points by showing us the photographs and identifying items, won a prize. We ended up buying about a dozen prizes, all mementos from the Czech Republic, and let the top point-earner choose first, etc.

The photo hunt was one way for students to fill their unstructured time. Another way was to fulfill an assignment: a self-guided walking tour from the guidebook each student received at the beginning of the semester.<sup>7</sup> In the attached essay, Lori makes reference to this assignment when she talks about the Royal Route. Divided into small groups, students followed a self-guided tour for an afternoon and then reported to the whole class at our next meal together. We included a couple of guided tours during our structured time, but giving students the opportunity to explore the city on their own and with a purpose encouraged them to see the city not as a backdrop to be enjoyed passively but as a place where it is possible to teach oneself something around every corner.

Our first days in Prague were busy with structured group activities, and unstructured time became more plentiful as students became more comfortable navigating Prague on their own. Near the beginning of the global experience, the entire class made two excursions outside of Prague: one day we went to Kutná Hora and another to Terezín. We took public trains and buses in an attempt to teach students how to travel independently through public transit. In a pre-packaged tour we probably would have been ushered from hotel to location in a chartered bus, and the students would have

missed the sense of finding one's way. One of our goals was to instill the skills and confidence to travel independently, and, as our global experience continued, we could not have been happier to hear about their individual adventures.

Kutná Hora is a town worth visiting for its medieval significance alone (it was a rich silver-mining town and played a prominent role in the Hussite Revolution), but we were fortunate to be invited to visit the grammar school (Gymnázium) Jiřího Orteny,<sup>8</sup> where students could experience life in a more everyday setting. Our students did not envy the Czech students who had to unexpectedly offer their English presentations in front of a large group of native English speakers. It provided an important glimpse, though, of modern life in the Czech Republic. Terezín, which we visited on another day, in contrast offered a vista into the darker corners of history. Terezín is a small town almost wholly dedicated to preserving the memory of the Holocaust victims who passed through or died in the town or its adjacent fortress, known as Theresienstadt, during the Nazi occupation. Both days reinforced with immediate and tactile evidence what could only be guessed in a vicarious manner through the readings: both the mundane and the deeply scarring made an impact on the place we were studying and experiencing.

### **Reflection and Integration of All Parts**

On the airplane from Prague to the United States, bursts of excited chatter sporadically punctuated an atmosphere of excessive fatigue. After weeks of preparation and ten days of visual, auditory, physical, and intellectual experiences, the journey home did feel like an ending in many ways. In the final weeks of class, our greatest challenge was to continue the learning experience at home, to challenge students to meet the rigors

of an upper-division course, and to allow them to recognize their personal accomplishments.

All of the essay assignments for the class were designed with several core goals in mind: 1) we wanted this to be a truly interdisciplinary course that would allow students to view the Czech Republic from multiple, intersecting perspectives; 2) we wanted assignments to correspond thematically during the classroom and global experiences so that students could build connections between their more traditional academic experience and their time abroad; 3) as in most other college courses, we wanted students to use writing not only to demonstrate knowledge but to explore and connect ideas in a complex and meaningful way.

We created the Global Experience Essay assignment to encourage our students, many of whom were first generation college students who had never travelled abroad, to extend their experiences and their new expertise to members of the university community and to other communities to which they belong. Students wrote short essays about some aspect of their travel experience and submitted these essays for publication in the student newspaper, other community newspapers, and on-line venues. Some had their global experience essays published in Metropolitan State University's newspaper and others published in local newspapers with which they had a cultural connection, such as *Hmong Times*. Through this assignment, students learned to adapt stories from their global experience and their writing for different audiences, and many of them gained a new level of understanding by positioning themselves as experts ready to share their newfound knowledge and enthusiasm with others.

The final assignment of the course returned students to an academic audience and asked them to perform research. Student research paper topics were developed individually with input from instructors in order to encourage students to develop their own intellectual curiosity and authority. The goals of interdisciplinarity, unity between the classroom and global experience, and academic inquiry continued in the formulation of this assignment. Whatever the focus, students were required to combine literary and historical sources to continue our interdisciplinary work. In addition, students performed academic research that was relevant to specific experiences in the Czech Republic. For example, after viewing the physical space of Terezín, several students then did academic research at home to further their knowledge of the concentration camp. Their papers combined scholarly research with observed physical details to create unique perspectives on the history and lasting influence of a place. In this way, the classroom and global experiences reinforced each other and led to independent exploration.

No course goes exactly according to plan or meets every expectation of an instructor. Though challenging for both instructors and students, study abroad courses allow for great intellectual reward when flexibility is part of the plan. Several students from this particular course have expressed a desire to travel abroad again and that means that we were successful in transmitting the travel bug to others.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not the only study abroad class Metropolitan State University offers, but it was the first study abroad course for Danielle and the second for Jeanne. Andrew Cseter, the director of TRiO at Metropolitan State, has been key to the success of study abroad at our university and he played no small role in the execution of this course, from funding to organizing. Our purpose in this article is to discuss the pedagogy of designing and executing the academic aspects of the course, so we do not ask him to do even more than he has already done; we owe him many thanks for his support, dedication, and work, and this course would not have been possible without him.

<sup>2</sup> We required the following books: Hugh Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2004); Bohumil Hrabal, *Closely Watched Trains* (Evanston, IL:

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Northwestern University Press, 1995); Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis, The Penal Colony, and Other Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1995); and Paul Wilson, ed., *Prague: A Traveler's Literary Companion* (Berkeley, CA: Whereabouts Press, 1995). We also required selected texts from other books such as selections from Cosmas of Prague's *The Chronicle of the Czechs*, trans. Lisa Wolverton (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), *The Early Poetry of Jaroslav Seifert*, trans. Dana Loewy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), among others. Anyone interested in the syllabus is invited to email Jeanne Grant at [jeanne.grant@metrostate.edu](mailto:jeanne.grant@metrostate.edu).

<sup>3</sup> František Langer, "The Sword of St. Wenceslas," trans. A. G. Brain, in Paul Wilson, ed., *Prague: A Traveler's Literary Companion*, 65.

<sup>4</sup> Jindřiška Smetanová, "American Heating, Josef Vrkoč, Vinohrady," trans. Paul Wilson, in *Prague: A Traveler's Literary Companion*, 53-59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 58 and 59.

<sup>6</sup> Our library at Metropolitan State University loans out digital cameras, so no student would have to purchase one.

<sup>7</sup> Each student received a copy of *Eyewitness Travel: Prague* (New York: DK Publishing, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Many thanks to the Fulbright Commission in Prague for putting us into contact with the gymnasium's principal, Dr. Vladislav Slaviček, who generously invited us and gave us a thorough tour of the school's outstanding facilities.

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## A Humbling Experience

by

Nicole Mariska Sindelar

Nicole Mariska Sindelar was a History major in the College of Arts and Sciences at Metropolitan State University who graduated since writing this piece, which she wrote for an informal presentation to encourage other students to travel.

I fell in love with Prague during my nine-day stay. The experience changed me. I realized things about myself as a mother, an American, and a human being that I never dreamed possible. I wanted to take the city home with me, so I decided to take a small, broken cobblestone, which I thought of as just a rock. While at the airport, I was told to wait while the clerk searched my bag. I wondered if I had forgotten an enormous container of liquid over three ounces in my bag...then, he pulled out the cobblestone. He held it up to me and said sternly, "This is part of my country. This is ours, not yours to take...it belongs to us. We love our country and our country stays here." I gave a remorseful, bewildered look and apologized like a five-year-old being caught sneaking candy. He took the piece of cobblestone and sent me on my way. The incident is so vivid, embarrassing, and enlightening. It changed me.

I consider myself a well-rounded American. Before going to Prague, I never would have considered myself ethnocentric, but the experience in the Czech Republic opened my eyes to how ethnocentric I was. While walking the streets of Prague, eating their food, and touring the city, it dawned on me that I was the outsider. I did not speak the language, I got lost a lot, and I did not truly understand the Czech culture. How could I have been so ignorant? I was thrilled to see the history, stand where events had

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happened that changed the world, and enjoy the change of scenery. I just expected that Czechs would help me when I got lost or did not know how to read a menu. That was a very selfish assumption. I did get help from Czech people, but for me to expect it was egocentric. I see how the term “silly American” came to be and I was embarrassed. The experience humbled me.

Another eye-opening experience was how real the Holocaust became. I had seen movies and read stories, but it does not come close to seeing the reality in person. 250,000 Jewish people were killed by the Nazis in one place. The number is too big to imagine. Walking the streets, seeing plates on the ground with names of those murdered in front of homes where they once lived, was heartbreaking. Reading poems and seeing the artwork of children who knew their unspeakable fate made my blood boil. I tried to imagine telling a Nazi officer my eight-year-old son was thirteen so he wouldn't be shipped away and murdered, hoping beyond everything that he would believe me. Then what about my three-year-old daughter? There would be no chance for her. Even trying to imagine this makes my heart hurt and changes my spirit as a mother.

I left Prague thinking I had no regrets. I left with a somewhat clearer understanding of the Czech Republic. Having an airport clerk show me his sincere love for his homeland humbled me.

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## Life before Prague

by

Lori Yang

Lori Yang was a Business major in the College of Management at Metropolitan State University and graduated after writing this piece, which she wrote for the class's Global Experience Essay assignment.

Whenever I met people who travelled the world, I was curious about their adventures and my wish was to travel abroad. I believed that a study abroad program would help me become a worldly, diverse citizen. Not too long ago, it was only a dream that was far from my reach. In December 2010, I received the Global Experience Scholarship, which included a global experience to the Czech Republic during spring semester. I made preparations to purchase books early, and then I waited for the spring semester to begin. Little did I know that it would be among the best ten days of my life when life and global learning met, and contributed to my personal and professional development.

### **Our Royal Route Adventure**

On a sunny day, eight students journeyed through the Royal Route; it was the most memorable adventure in Prague because it was a shared experience. The Royal Coronation Route was traveled by Bohemian kings and became part of my history as well. The amazing tour starts from Gothic Powder Gate to some of the oldest streets of Prague, and leads to St. Vitus's Cathedral by the castle (Hradčany). It is by far one of the most enjoyable walks in Prague because it took us through all the main attractions, through the towns connecting our history and literary contexts, and putting our studies

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into perspective. On occasion, my group and I stopped to educate ourselves about the coronation procession.

During the beginning of the journey, two men dressed as knights greeted us in Czech, “dobrý den,” which means “hello.” We also ran into an entertainer dressed in a long golden robe standing proudly with a golden mask as he entertained us. One by one, we took a picture next to the street entertainer and dropped a few koruny (Czech currency). As we left Celetná Street, one of the oldest streets in Prague and also famous for the house “At The Black Madonna” for its cubist architecture, there were people hustling and bustling about making their way to the Old Town Square, where all the magic happens. In Old Town Square years ago, there were numerous prosecutions for political and religious matters. The astronomical clock is also located there, and I remembered tourists waiting for the show. I came to a halt as I was astonished by how easy it was to get from one town to the next. Hundreds of years ago, the towns of Prague used to be separately administered municipalities. Now, the towns of Prague are intertwined together. As early as 1458, it was important that during the coronation procession the king greet each town but also bring the towns together. In front of me was the Church of Our Lady before Týn, where most Royal Coronations stopped for pledges of loyalty from the university, established in 1348. The beautiful church is now hidden by modern buildings. From the early fifteenth century until 1620, the church was controlled by the Hussites, Christian reformers who followed Jan Hus. There is a monument to Jan Hus in the middle of Old Town Square. Off in the distance, many noises came from entertainers and musicians playing a Czech tune and from artists selling their crafts.

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Soon we were at Charles Bridge. My eyes lit up! Charles Bridge connects the multi-cultured towns in the heart of the city. Trucking across the bridge, a classmate of mine whispered to me, “Who do you think has the sword?” I looked up and saw groups of children playing nearby. I chuckled to myself, and whispered under my breath, “there it is, the sword.” It reminded me of the story that I read in class by František Langer, “The Sword of St. Wenceslas,” the tale about the miraculous sword now hidden next to a child’s heart, symbolizing Czech nationalism and its future. The story came to life, and I have a greater appreciation for the education I received beforehand. Mostecká Street was the stop where the mayor passed the keys over to the king. The area was quiet and filled with the locals making their way around the tight street corners. There were small, dinky shops open for business selling wooden crafts, fancy jewelry, and fresh baked goods. We then realized we were at the bottom of a hill that leads to the castle. As we hiked it, we captured in photographs the cobblestone streets and buildings on Nerudova Street, which was named after the famous Czech poet and journalist Jan Neruda. Along the twenty-foot brick wall, we made a sharp right turn and followed the staircases leading us to the castle ramp. At the Matthias Gate, we had a great view of the red-orange rooftops brushed with hints of faded green, the Vltava River, the Observation Tower in Petřín Park, and my beloved Charles Bridge. Finally, the Royal Route came to an end. The procession ended here with the coronation at St. Vitus’s Cathedral. Prague has some of the most beautiful historical monuments representing all types of architectural styles from Gothic to Baroque.

My perspective has changed dramatically since the global experience as I have a longing to travel abroad again, especially back to Europe. Now I have a greater

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appreciation for the historical lens for understanding the past, present, and future. The cities where I live, Saint Paul and Minneapolis, are known as the Twin Cities but are not particularly known for their history. There are two historic landmarks, Fort Snelling and Mill City, that are commonly known among Minnesotans, and both are U.S. National Historic Landmarks owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. Fort Snelling was originally known as Fort Saint Anthony and was founded in 1819. At the time, it was a military fortification and is located on top of a bluff along two main rivers, the Mississippi River and the Minnesota River. The Mill City Museum originated as the Washburn A. Mill, which nowadays is known as Mill City and was one of the world's largest mills in the early 1880s. Mill City shaped history forever in the flour industry, for the Mississippi River, and the growth the city of Minneapolis. As for the Czech Republic, the history is one of many reasons to travel to Prague. I have a greater appreciation for the European culture and especially the Czechs because of my knowledge of the historical and literary context.



