

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND STUDY ABROAD

Social-networking technology has helped make geographic borders almost irrelevant for young people seeking information about education programs or staying in touch with peers. Charlotte West is a freelance writer and former international student.

Students are increasingly using social-networking sites such as Facebook to research their study-abroad destinations and get information from people with experience. This technology has also proven to be an important way to keep in touch with friends made while abroad, as well as to make new ones.

Café Abroad was founded in 2006 by Dan Schwartzman, then a 24-year-old graduate from Pennsylvania State University recently returned home from a study-abroad stint in Australia. He wanted to “create a site by students, for students, where students can answer any question another student may have with genuine student-generated information.”

Katherine Lonsdorf, a recent graduate in diplomacy and world affairs from Occidental College in Los Angeles, wrote a series of articles for Café Abroad. Her writing inspired several students to get in touch with questions about her year abroad in Jordan and the Middle East.

“While writing for Café Abroad, I was contacted by at least a dozen or so other students from around the country who were thinking about studying in Jordan and wanted to talk with me about my experience,” she says. “They usually found me on Facebook, after picking up my name from a byline.”

Café Abroad InPRINT

In the several years since its launch, Café Abroad has blossomed into a nationally distributed magazine, Café Abroad InPRINT, currently distributed at more than 330 colleges and universities around the United States. Dan Schwartzman has also developed what he calls “The Café Abroad Networking Solution.” He says the concept is “a social network for study-abroad offices to connect students internally within their own schools in a private network overseen by study-abroad administrators -- in addition to a global network where students could more openly share their abroad experience with other students at their school.”

The importance of student-generated content, such as the articles written by Lonsdorf, is also being increasingly recognized by educational institutions. The State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz, for instance, launched a series of study-abroad blogs written by students in various programs.

Penny Schouten, a study-abroad marketing consultant who was involved with getting the New Paltz blogs off the ground, explains that while the initial goal of the blogs was to lighten the workload for office staff, it became much more than that. In addition to chronicling students’ time abroad, the blogs created continuity and community between prospective and current students, who also felt “they were doing a great service to their campus.”

Schouten also spoke to the importance of students being able to get the information from their peers. “Students didn’t want to hear from me where the cool clubs are in London; they wanted to hear it from other students,” she says.

A Spirit of Collaboration

Schouten and Schwartzman both recognize the potential of social media in transforming how students go about making their study-abroad choices. Schwartzman, for his part, hopes that blogs, Facebook, and individual networking solutions are just the first step.

“To me,” Schwartzman says, “the next level of study-abroad social networking is a spirit of true collaboration where information about programs, schools, program providers, and study abroad destinations is interchanged in a free-flowing, centralized forum. In this forum, students would be able to communicate with each other about study abroad uncensored and openly. This, of course, is a bit of an idealistic outlook -- but it’s worth striving towards.”

You can check out these social-networking sites on the Internet at <http://www.cafeabroad.com> and <http://www.abroadblogs.newpaltz.edu>.

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