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Visual Rhetoric in Australia: A Unique Study Abroad Experience

 Students participating in the Rhetoric and Professional Writing minor program at Longwood University already receive an outstanding education. The webpage for the school’s English department describes the program as an opportunity for students to “practice and polish [their] professional writing skills” and “learn to create clear, convincing messages for a variety of public communications jobs and develop [their] understanding of persuasive elements of writing.” The competent faculty members, the motivated students, and the well-rounded coursework expected of students in this program make it a valuable addition to Longwood’s academic catalog; however, the program could reap numerous benefits with the addition of a study abroad trip to Australia that focuses on concepts of visual rhetoric. An Australian study abroad that teaches students about visual rhetoric would be a rewarding experience for students in the Rhetoric and Professional Writing minor due to the myriad of diverse and place-based opportunities it would offer to those involved.

 The first category of benefits for conducting an experience of this kind is arguably the simplest: the benefits of study abroad itself. Though this program will likely appeal primarily to students in the Rhetoric and Professional Writing minor, the course that will be taught abroad (ENGL 303: Visual Rhetoric and Document Design) has no prerequisites apart from the basic freshman English course (ENGL 150). As such, students of various academic programs and interests will be eligible to participate and diversify their course load. In an article regarding the benefits of short-term study abroad experiences, two professors from Muhlenberg College noted that after leading a study abroad trip to Costa Rica (focused around the course “Environmental and Cultural Conservation in Latin America”), many non-science majors who participated opted to take upper-level science courses “specifically because of their participation in the program” (Lewis and Niesenbaum 43). By taking a variety of courses throughout different subject areas, students can expand on their interdisciplinary knowledge and improve their overall academic skills. The Stanford University Advising Department’s website explains that students should take classes outside of their major “to make connections between methodologies or approaches, to draw insight from exploring a topic or subject from multiple angles, to acquire multiple competencies that can help you adapt to new challenges throughout a lifetime of learning” (“Why Should I…”). Introducing the faculty-led, visual rhetoric-based study abroad in Australia to Longwood’s curriculum could result in a more well-rounded, better educated student body in which students are well-versed in multiple disciplines, thus making a positive contribution the school’s overall intellectual environment.

Additionally, Lewis and Niesenbaum added that their students received a more intellectually stimulating experience by participating in hands-on activities while in Costa Rica. They used the biology majors who had attended as an example, saying that their interdisciplinary interests and focuses were heightened as they received valuable field experience (as opposed to customary laboratory work) (Lewis and Niesenbaum 44). This observation emphasizes the importance of offering interactive learning opportunities, such as study abroad trips, rather than the lecture course format to which most college students have become accustomed. Allowing students to participate in this trip to Australia would teach them the importance of visual rhetoric and interdisciplinary connections in an intellectually immersive environment.

The study abroad to Australia will also benefit students by providing them with the opportunity to study a previously marginalized topic. This trip would center around the concepts of visual rhetoric and iconography and their presence in Australia, specifically in the cities of Sydney and Cairns. Until this point, this topic has been relatively unexplored. While numerous foreign cities already have well-known elements of visual rhetoric at work (i.e. the Big Ben clock with London and the Eiffel Tower with Paris), Australia’s iconography proves to be a lesser-known topic. Faye Ginsburg, an anthropologist from New York University, states in an article that since the late 1970s, Australians have been striving to create new forms of media that adapt to “a range of expressive and political purposes…motivated by a desire to envision and strengthen a ‘cultural future’” (Ginsburg 365). By studying the visually rhetorical devices found within Australian culture under the instruction of experienced Longwood professors, Dr. Guler and Dr. Lettner-Rust, Longwood students will have the opportunity to conduct innovative research and perhaps even contribute to this cultural future.

While in Australia, students will also receive firsthand experience dealing with the theory of ethno-relativism and how to examine intercultural connections. In an article published by intercultural relations expert Dr. Milton J. Bennett, this idea is explained as asking students “to transcend traditional ethno-centrism and to explore new relationships across cultural boundaries” (Bennett 21). Bennett continues to explain that a lack of concern about the happenings of people of other cultures is a natural phenomenon that one should strive to remedy through the expanding of their perspective and the examination of new places, ideas, and issues. In doing so, they can better interpret and evaluate global information and decrease the selfishness of their world view (Bennett 41). Longwood students would certainly have this opportunity while visiting Australia to study visual rhetoric. Since visual rhetoric maintains an applicability to numerous aspects of Australian culture (tourism, lifestyles of local people, general “feelings” or “vibes” within the country, etc.), students would expand their mindset to reach beyond their own culture and increase their sense of ethno-relativism.

During the trip, students will gain valuable knowledge about a somewhat overlooked subject through the examination of different features in Australian cities as rhetorical devices. This will be achieved primarily through excursions to culturally significant locations within the cities of Sydney and Cairns, including the Taronga Zoo, the Sydney Opera House, and the Great Barrier Reef, among others. While visiting these places, students will note the ways in which they act as devices that persuade people to visit a place and how they become heavily associated with the culture of the country over time. For example, while visiting the Taronga Zoo, students will dedicate their day to exploring Australian wildlife species. They will strive to identify widely known species found in the country (such as koalas or kangaroos) and compare them to other species who seem to deserve more recognition in the fabric of Australian culture. Their findings will then be used to create short presentations (completed during the following day’s class) and thoughtful written reflections. Projects of this nature will allow Longwood students a chance to be pioneers of research for unique and previously unobserved subjects while benefitting from experiencing the richness of Australian culture.

 Additionally, students will expand on their knowledge of rhetorical concepts through participation in activities known as “Overlooked Days.” These days will consist of activities in which students set out to explore Sydney or Cairns and initially attempt to follow groups of tourists along what seems to be the intended path established within the place. Students will note the ways in which tourists are subconsciously “guided” throughout these cities and attempt to determine what, if anything, is being discreetly but intentionally “hidden” from them by the place. They will also attempt to determine how these Australian cities evolved from distant, impersonal spaces into meaningful, memory-filled places. Through focusing on the study of generally overlooked items within foreign places, students will gain a thorough understanding of how to successfully utilize concepts of visual rhetoric.

 Students will also benefit from exposure to a variety of new people and cultures as they stay with homestay families in Sydney and a hostel in Cairns. By living in the homes of Australian families, students will become immersed in more authentic aspects of their culture and customs. An online flyer published by Australia’s Central Queensland University invites students to offer their homes to students abroad, explaining the numerous positive aspects of doing so. They cite the opportunities to form lifelong friendships, learn new languages and cultural customs, and examine familiar aspects of their town from new and different perspectives as just a few of the benefits of participating in such a program. While this piece strives to appeal to the host of a homestay experience, the same benefits apply to the students participating as well. For Longwood students participating in the Australia trip, these benefits will contribute to both their personal understanding and enjoyment of the culture as well as their academic ability to analyze and write about it. Conversely, during their time in the hostel, they will likely meet and interact with other students and tourists of Australia from various countries around their world. This similarly immersive experience will improve the students’ abilities to interact with people from various origins, forging a strong sense of intercultural connection throughout their trip.

 Lastly, this faculty-led trip to Australia will benefit Longwood University as a whole. Currently, Longwood students wishing to study abroad in Australia may only choose from a few rigidly-scheduled affiliate programs that have no staff involvement on the university’s end. An article from the athletic training department at Springfield College states that many students decide not to study abroad with these affiliate programs “due to curricular progression and clinical education demands” (Guyer 17). Many students on rigorous academic paths at Longwood University undoubtedly face similar conflicts; however, adding a short-term faculty-led program like the trip to Australia would increase the available opportunities for students to take part in such experiences. Another professor from University of California San Diego noted that after spending time with students attending a Global Seminar trip in Istanbul for pre-departure activities, he “learned a bit about the students and tailored the remaining meetings to address their specific needs” (Herbst 214). Adding a faculty-led trip to Australia would increase the non-restrictive study abroad offerings available to Longwood students while allowing them to work closely with professors that will ensure the experience is adapted appropriately to their academic needs.

Longwood University’s Mission Statement (located on the school’s website) contends that Longwood serves as “an institution of higher learning dedicated to the development of citizen leaders who are prepared to make positive contributions to the common good.” Through participating in the visual rhetoric trip to Australia, students will have numerous opportunities to adopt roles of citizen leadership and contribute to the common good. Students who participate in the groundbreaking research conducted on this trip will walk away from the trip with strong leadership skills derived from their experiences abroad. After learning how to properly conduct interviews with Australian locals, making independent decisions regarding what routes should be taken to study certain things, using findings to come to well-thought-out conclusions, and presenting these conclusions to their peers, students’ administrative capabilities will flourish. The addition of this trip would also be in accordance with Longwood’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), described on the school’s website as “a forward-looking document describing changes the university will implement to improve student learning outcomes.”

 The Longwood University Mission Statement also contends that “as the only four-year public institution in south central Virginia, Longwood University serves as a catalyst for regional prosperity and advancement.” While Longwood’s influence within the realm of regional, statewide, and even national academics should be regarded as an outstanding achievement, school officials should strive to expand this influence to more far-reaching, international levels. The school’s Office of Student Research writes on their webpage that “the magic of undergraduate research is particularly powerful at Longwood, where close ties between students and faculty and small classes create a potent elixir of collaboration and opportunity.” This “potent elixir” could without a doubt be recreated in the Australian setting under the direction of Dr. Guler and Dr. Lettner-Rust. By conducting innovative research in a setting rarely offered for study abroad programs, Longwood University students and faculty will establish the school’s reputation as an outstanding place for those who love knowledge and learning.

 Lastly, the Longwood Mission Statement claims that the school builds upon “its strong foundation in the liberal arts and sciences.” As Longwood receives increased recognition and institutional prestige, faculty and administrators should attempt to ignite growth and change within individual programs. Although the Rhetoric and Professional Writing minor program already offers students numerous valuable opportunities, it deserves more large-scale recognition. This could be accomplished through a unique study abroad that examines a previously overlooked topic.

The numerous opportunities for personal and academic growth offered by a faculty-led trip to Australia make it a worthwhile option for students in Longwood’s Rhetoric and Professional Writing program. By providing students with opportunities to study or conduct research on an undiscovered but interesting topic, interact with people from countries around the world, and live up to the institutional purpose of Longwood itself, the entire school will benefit from their success.

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