

Experiential/Service Learning on the Island of Procida, Italy: a University of Rochester pilot study abroad program, June 2017

The premise on which this program is based is the concept of a ‘sustainable’ study abroad experience together with a ‘learning-by-doing’ approach to language acquisition and cultural awareness. Students were brought to a small, yet extremely well defined community with a history dating back over 3000 years when it was settled by sailors and merchants from Mycenae. Most of the participants in the program had little to no knowledge of their destination except that it was a tiny, volcanic island off the coast of Naples. Majors ranged from English to Engineering, Voice to Economics. Countries represented in our group of ten included China, Brazil, and Mexico in addition to the US with two students with parents of international background that included South Africa and Columbia - all representing the University of Rochester.

The 4-week program aimed at ‘giving back’ to our host community while gaining an understanding of its history and present-day culture. This was accomplished through volunteer work on the one hand and formal lessons paired with *ad hoc* visits and hands-on activities on the other. A series of encounters with ‘experts’ of the island’s history and culture were organized to give direct testimonials of life, traditions, and areas of excellence on the island. These included meetings with members of the renowned Nautical Institute and a visit to the historic nautical museum at the school, a meeting with a government official in City Hall, an afternoon with a local author and artist at her home, as well as a lesson in the antique art of embroidering with gold in the workshop of an artisan dedicated to the history and restoration of the traditional costume of the island. Our work as volunteers, instead, was carried out at a number of different venues. These included work with a civic group that tends to forgotten and often neglected areas of Procida, work in a community vegetable garden, work under the auspices of the local government on a historical landmark (Palazzo D’Avalos), activities in a farm holiday house and several encounters with elementary school children within a science project called ‘Scuola Viva’. On each occasion students would interact directly with representatives from the individual groups with ages ranging from 4 to 75. All of these activities were complemented with formal Italian lessons.

Of the various outcomes of our program, what was quite evident was how, over the course of our experience, language barriers were overcome by the need to work together. Peer to peer, colleague-to-colleague language acquisition was carried out with ease even when neither of the partners had any experience in the language of the other. Friendships, mutual admiration and a sense of gratefulness both on the part of the students and on that of the people with whom we interacted grew with each encounter. Students were struck by the open friendliness and generosity of our interlocutors, and thanks to this, the perception of being part of the local fabric increased with each passing day. It was not uncommon for the students to see and be greeted in the streets by a child, a student, or an older acquaintance when going about daily matters. Clearly all of the participants broadened their individual comfort zones within this foreign setting.

What follows are excerpts from weekly journal summaries that the students were required to present within the cultural awareness segment of the program.

Overall, what I've been most excited about is using the language and hearing others use it. I like the fact that we will be here for a month because it really gives time to talk to locals, experience the culture, and get more out of the experience. Procida is a beautiful classroom...

My time on Procida was amazing and beautiful. I felt truly connected to the community and felt immersed in the culture.

Victoria Breza, Biomedical Engineering major, Class 2019

I feel this is the absolute beauty and success of our program, because it is one of cultural immersion and experiential learning. I have learned so much more through meeting people on the island and voluntarily working for them than I could have from a book in a classroom. Books are important, and reading a historical guide of Procida provides valuable insight to island life, but that never actualizes to a legitimate perspective and understanding the way cultural immersion allows.

John Willoughby Cole, Economics major, Class 2019

On our second week in Italy, we learned about a different aspect of the Procida community: politics and civil engagement. [...] Therefore, as a student of Political Science, I was very happy to learn more about the politics of the island

What impressed me the most about the way of life in Procida were its simplicity, diversity and vivacity. As we explored the island, we encountered all kinds of stories that had one thing in common: a passion for Procida.

Leticia Daruge, Psychology and Political Science major, Class of 2019

There are some different customs here than in the States or in China, but they are easy to get used to. When we try to order food in Italian, the waitresses never get impatient and they are always willing to teach us the words for the food in Italian. Everyone is friendly and nice on the island. This will definitely be one of the most unforgettable moments of my entire college life.

Yuxing Li, Mathematics major, Class of 2019

Apart from the friends who figured prominently throughout our stay ... there are the kind faces of strangers which breeze across my mind immediately upon the mention of Procida. ... that part of Procida will always be lightly perfumed in my mind. Cashiers in every bakery would inquire "Is that all?" before carefully packing one's meager purchases into separate paper bags. Reckless motorcyclists always manage to greet each other in impossible circumstances. ... the Procidian summer ... reserves a very soft space in my heart that I'd like to keep revisiting in the years to come."

Tong Liu, English major, Class of 2018

The day-to-day lifestyle in Procida is a lifestyle that I have never seen before. The island is so small that almost everyone knows and interacts with each other in public. Also, people here are much more patient and respectful than what I am used to seeing. Every time I go into a shop, I try my best to speak as much Italian as I can, but of course I still struggle to get through some exchanges. The shop owners are always willing to help and understand...

As I continue on with school and learn new things, I know my time in Procida is something that will always have a place in my heart and in my fondest memories. This trip took me out of my comfort zone in the best way possible, which is not something that I was expecting to happen.

Jeremy Lopez, Eastman School of Music, Class of 2020

Physical qualities aside, I'm surprised and grateful that I got to interact with so many local Procidians. (It certainly helped when practicing my Italian!) More importantly, I feel lucky beyond belief to have spent one month completely indulged in such a warm, open, and inviting culture, one that I didn't expect to be so welcoming.

I think there was something very special about the group of UR students on the program. No matter how tired or hungry, everyone was excited and helpful when we cleared a garden's path or built a scarecrow with the school kids. I feel lucky to have made such wonderful UR friends, and I look forward to keeping in touch with everyone.

Grace Narlock, Anthropology major, Class of 2017

I feel like I also grew a lot in my speaking skills because in Procida people would not talk to you in English. I also learned from speaking to other young people our age, since they would correct what I said wrong. ... I will really miss the island since I felt that I was just getting used to everything from the language to the people.

Cynthia Rocha, Microbiology, Class of 2018

While there is a language barrier to a certain extent, I have found both the Italians and the members of our group are dedicated to learning each other's respective languages in order to communicate effectively. In the end, we always find a way to understand each other. The passion and generosity that courses through these people's veins can be experienced in everything they do. I can feel it when I have a conversation with them, and even when I walk down one of the many narrow streets. I feel very fortunate to be a part of this Procida experience!

Giuliana Vasile, Social sciences, Class of 2020

The last week in Procida was the most difficult week. It didn't seem possible that we'd already spent nearly a month in Procida. It felt like we'd been part of the community for years. That is the value of experiential learning in comparison with a traditional study abroad program. If we had been far removed from the community of Procida, merely enjoying the sights while independently taking classes, we never would have grown to love the island as much. We never would have made the strong bonds and unforgettable friendships.

My experience in Procida has inspired me to focus more on my International Relations major and delve into the political realm. I'm so thankful for my time in Procida. I couldn't have attended the program without generous grants from alumni and the institution, and hope others will recognize how much this program has impacted me.

John Willoughby Cole