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Abroad in the Archives: Engaging Students Across Cultures *and* Through Time

By Christiane Métral

Smith College established a list of six essential capacities to guide student education. One is the ability to engage across differences in place, culture, and time. The Smith Archives offered the ideal resources with which to seamlessly integrate this capacity with the goals of the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) as well as provide an Action-oriented Approach to language teaching, one of the key concepts of *The Common European Framework Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Council of Europe, 2020).

In an Action-oriented Approach (AoA), the learner accomplishes collaborative tasks anchored in real-world practices. The language classroom invites the outside world in for genuine and dynamic communicative practices (Piccardo & North, 2019). Language learning happens while integrating, creating, and producing knowledge through cultural experiences. AoA involves projects that allow initiative, encouraging the learner to exert agency and produce a final artifact, proposal, or performance as a collaborative production.

Culture, Action, and Critical Thinking, which I call CACt pedagogy, is the foundation of the Abroad in the Archives project which draws upon the very rich correspondence collection of alumnae who participated in two Smith Study Abroad Programs—one in Paris, France and the other in Geneva, Switzerland. A wealth of cultural material has been donated to the Smith Archives, including directors' reports and coursework written in French; scrapbooks written in both French and English; letters and postcards, often in English; as well as fascinating photo albums. My Intermediate level students traveled virtually, not only in space but also in time, researching the experiences of the Smith Alumnae who participated in these programs over several decades.

The Smith program in Paris was founded in 1925 and is the oldest continuous program of this kind in the U.S. (Gantrel,

n.d.). The Geneva program was established in 1946, on the heels of World War II. Studying archival material that documents the lives of alumnae in Paris and Geneva at different historical moments during the 20th Century introduced students to practices and perspectives of both other cultures and other eras.

Students practiced the five goal areas of the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015): Cultures, Connections, Communication, Comparisons, and Communities, not only by immersing themselves in the reflections, feelings, resilience, and resourcefulness of Smith alumnae (Interpretive **Communication**), but also by experiencing their own reflections and feelings and by understanding cultural differences with an historical perspective (Making **Connections**/Relating **Cultural** Practices to Perspectives/**Comparisons**). Students worked in pairs on this independent research project, which was conducted outside of class meetings (Classroom **Community**) displaying their findings in a creative and informative final digital narrative (Presentational **Communication**, speaking and writing). See Table 1.

Discovering the Archives

I introduced the Abroad in the Archives project to students at the beginning of the Fall 2023 semester. We then had an initial class meeting at the library to meet with a Smith archivist who introduced students to the special collections of the archives and the specific files available for their projects.

Abroad in the Archives came to life when students began combing through the files that the archivist had selected prior to our meeting. Seeing the photographs, reading student letters and directors reports, and flipping through scrapbooks inspired the students to learn more about these special alumnae of another era.

The students developed a variety of themes for their final projects. They could choose a specific alumna and report on her

Abroad in the Archives: Goals, Student Tasks, and World-Readiness Standards

Project Goals	Standards	Student Tasks	Tasks Assessed
Engage across differences in places, cultures, and time	Cultures Relating cultural practices to perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore identities and experiences of the past 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use critical thinking skills Analyze and synthesize information
Acquire global competence	Cultures/Connections/Comparisons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate cultural differences Reflect on the experiences of alumnae and their own experiences to evaluate identity and global citizenship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate in the target language Be alert to cultural differences
Work with archival material to discover the history of the Smith College Study Abroad Programs in Paris and Geneva	Cultures/Connections/Comparisons <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand knowledge of other disciplines Acquire information and diverse perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use authentic historical documents Practice research skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read/explore archival documents Acquire interdisciplinary knowledge: Information about French and Swiss cultures Acquire knowledge about European history
Acquire communicative competence	Communication Interpretive Communication Presentational Communication Interpersonal Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read archival documents in the target language Write a 600-word script in the target language for the digital narrative (DN) Make an oral presentation to the class in the target language Write two emails with a description of the project in the target language Narrate and record a 600-word script for the DN Answer students' questions after oral presentation to class 	NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can understand information Can articulate thoughts and ideas Can narrate and describe using connected sentences and paragraphs in the present and past tense Can understand differences in register in emails Can practice effective pronunciation Can deliver oral presentation to the class about the theme of the DN, what was learned, and the main takeaways Can ask and answer questions related to a class project
Acquire technology and media literacy	Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produce a digital narrative (DN) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creativity and inventiveness Effectively use authentic sources in ethical ways
Learn to collaborate on a project	Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice flexibility and adaptability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use interpersonal and problem-solving skills, manage workload Make complex choices and decisions

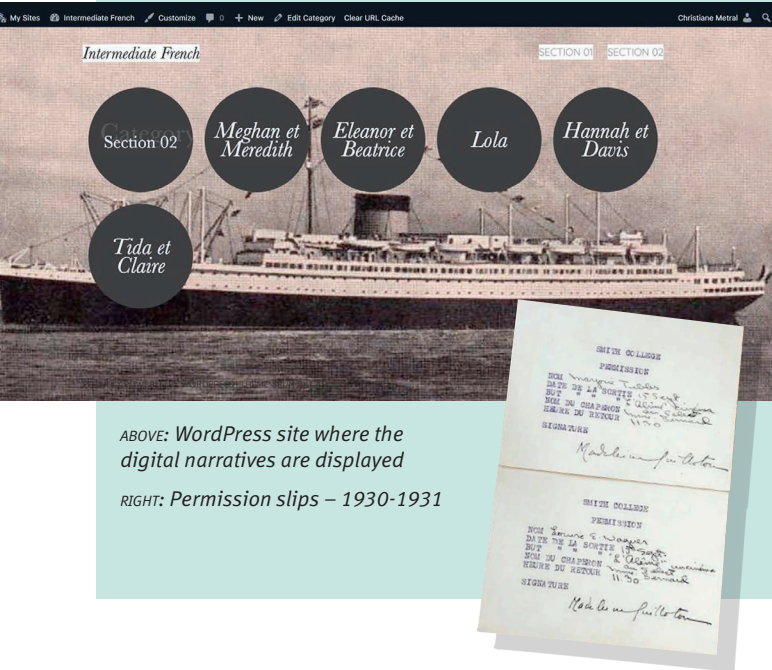
Table 1 *Abroad in the Archives: Project Goals, Student Tasks, and World-Readiness Standards*



Smith College Special Collections/College Archives



Scan the QR code or go to tinyurl.com/k9eey2j2 to watch a sample Abroad in the Archives Digital Narrative



ABOVE: WordPress site where the digital narratives are displayed

RIGHT: Permission slips – 1930-1931

experience in the third person; write a first-person narrative; or compare two alumnae of different periods, for instance a student who went to Europe before World War II with one who went after World War II, thereby giving them an opportunity to explore historical perspective. Another option was to compare the life of an alumna in Geneva with one in Paris. Further possibilities were to examine directors' reports over several decades, investigate the students' courses of study in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, or explore the cultural excursions offered by the programs at the time.

The rules of conduct, such as requiring a chaperone for outings after 8:00 p.m., the heavy workload, old pedagogical methods, commentaries on the students' cultural adaptation to their new environments, and their physical maladies, amused the class and sometimes made them gasp. This excerpt from a 1927 report is an example of what students found in the Archives:

“La santé a été bonne durant ce mois de septembre. Quelques rhumes consécutifs à la vague de froid, des éruptions de boutons provenant de changement de régime alimentaire ou de climat mais plutôt de l’abus de pâtisserie.”

“Health was good during the month of September. A few colds following the cold snaps, pimple breakouts not as a result of diet change or climate but rather from eating too many French pastries.”

Meandering through the reports or trying to decipher handwritten letters, students discovered a world foreign in a myriad of ways.

Early in the semester, I had them inform me of their theme, the materials they planned to use and whether they would focus on the Geneva or the Paris program or both. To encourage them to visit the Smith Archives regularly for research, I had students send me a couple of photos taken either from the Study Abroad alumnae files or of themselves doing research at the archives with their partner.

Because this was an independent project, I carefully scaffolded assignments throughout the semester to make sure students stayed on target, requiring that they email me, in French, with various types of information. This also provided them with the opportunity to learn the difference in register between a formal and an informal email.

The entire class met at the Archives for a writing workshop in October. Following this group work, students emailed me a paragraph about their research. The final written script was due just before the Thanksgiving break. I gave them feedback on language and content, and they submitted their final digital narratives two weeks later, 10 days before the end of the semester.

In this unit, students practiced several linguistic skills: writing, reading, and speaking, with special attention to specific grammar points, notably the past (*passé composé* vs *imparfait*) and subjunctive (i.e., I am surprised that ...).

Digital Pedagogy

Digital narratives proved to be a great pedagogical tool. Since I believe that technology should support pedagogical goals and not be a hindrance, I had students use Adobe Express, a free, accessible, easy-to-use, all-in-one creative tool for beginners.

In pairs, students wrote a 600-word script in French and recorded over the images they had selected. I was delighted with the creative and informative results. Adding music, animations, videos, widgets, and transitions, these digital natives produced very lively renderings of their research! While some were more comfortable than others navigating the technology, every student delivered highly creative final designs and performances.

Unlike a traditional paper, Adobe Express allowed students to not only practice and improve their written skills but also to refine their pronunciation. Their historical research was supported by both a visual and an audio display, reinforcing their communicative skills, while acquiring digital competencies. I collected their digital narratives and constructed a WordPress site linked to the class Moodle, offering easy access to their multimodal productions.

Culture/Action/Critical thinking: CACt Pedagogy

My primary intention was to conceive a project grounded in Culture, Action, and Critical Thinking (CACt), the nutrients of this design. An Action-oriented Approach (AoA) as defined by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) is rooted in a constructivist model which understands the user/learner as a “social agent.”

This project built knowledge about the history of Switzerland and France, as well as World War II (one group of students also referenced Indochina), but it also helped the students to think critically and see themselves as historicized subjects—that is, understand themselves as agents in and of an historical context. They saw themselves as social agents (Council of Europe, 2020), learning and reflecting about another culture; as historical agents, learning and reflecting about another period; as socio-historical agents, examining and questioning another culture in time and through the words of their fellow students; and as investigating their own culture.

Some alumnae commented positively and admiringly on plurilingualism in Europe before World War II, which generated a reflection by my 21st Century students about the world domination of English and the lack of interest in multilingualism in the U.S. today.

Reflecting on life abroad almost a century ago gave students an historical perspective on Study Abroad and brought to life the histories (with a lower case *h*) of these young women, their daily routines, their coursework, life on the cruise ship during the five-day journey to Europe (before the 1960s), the trips they took all over Europe during their vacations (yes, even then students traveled enthusiastically during school breaks), and the cultural practices and perspectives they were discovering.

Last but not least, students were exposed to and invited to reflect on a world without social media. In class, during the oral presentations of their digital narratives in the final two meeting sessions, we discussed what students studying abroad nowadays will leave as archives for coming generations. Some handwritten letters were hard to decipher, in part due to lack of practice, but how will our digital age anchor our past with technology evolving so quickly? We document our lives more intensively now than ever before, taking photographs, sending text messages, taking videos, posting on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, etc., but what will happen to all this data? Will it survive the passage of time?

CACt pedagogy encourages learners to think globally and historically, as citizens of the world, while acquiring intercultural competence. In the process, students also learned more about the current Smith Study Abroad programs, inspiring some of them to spend a year in Geneva or Paris during their junior year.

Student Engagement

At the end of the semester, over the course of several sessions, we watched a few minutes of each digital narrative. As another opportunity to practice oral skills, students commented in French on their work and their experience with the project. They were enthusiastic about their archival research (one student

even decided to pursue archival studies) and the final work they produced, commenting on what they had learned, what had surprised them, and how different life was decades ago.

Some students said that Abroad in the Archives made them want to study abroad, and it made those who had already decided to go even more excited about it, helping them frame a reflection on their future experience abroad. I also included a question about the project on the final exam. Several students spoke highly of the project, and none had anything negative to say about it (although it *was* the final exam).

To evaluate their work, I created a form to assign a grade which was based on research, pronunciation, grammar, and creativity. I admit to being generous with the grades because I was so impressed with the work that they did and the multiple competencies achieved through this engaging project.

With this multimodal media project, students practiced and improved their digital literacy, learned to collaborate on a project, and were exposed to archives and different historical perspectives, discovering a learning place on campus most of them had no idea existed.

No Archives, What Can You Do?

If you do not have easy access to archival sources, consider devising a project involving authentic material as a collaborative assignment which would culminate in the production of a digital narrative or a podcast (Miller, 2020). This project was aimed at Intermediate level students, but students at any level of competence can work on content knowledge, learning about food, clothing, art, customs, geography, and history in any country where the target language is spoken, using preselected websites or local historical sources.

Independent projects, skillfully guided by the instructor, foster learners' agency. Language acquisition and linguistic skills become much more effective when integrated in projects rooted in CACt pedagogy.

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