



Multilingual Immersion and Multimodal Composition as Contact Zones in Study Abroad

Kylie E. Quave, George Washington University¹

Charles Lewis, Beloit College²

Abstract: In 2018 we taught a pair of linked, three-week courses in and around Cusco, Peru. One was a creative writing course and the other was a writing-intensive anthropology course. The shared learning objectives included situating our experiences in relation to the region's history, critically analyzing travel and tourism today, and developing deeper understanding of the similarities/differences between various modes of inquiry and representation. The courses were predicated on immersive experiential learning, yet students were outsiders in a place where they did not speak either of the two principal languages (Spanish and Quechua). We posit that multimodal composition in multilingual contexts is one way to help students understand their experiences of cultural immersion and participant observation. This teaching artifact includes sample assignments that combine text, photography, and other media, along with sample student

¹ Kylie E. Quave is Assistant Professor of Writing and of Anthropology at the George Washington University. As an anthropological archaeologist, she has worked for over a decade in the Cusco, Peru region, collaborating with Peruvian and North American students and colleagues to reconstruct how local populations respond to colonization. She currently teaches first-year science writing and research. Email: kquave@gwu.edu

² Charles Lewis is Professor of English and Director of the Writing Program at Beloit College, where he teaches courses in expository writing, creative writing, and literature, all of which include giving students opportunities to do multimodal work. His off-campus work with student writers has ranged from a bicycling/writing class to help students engage with the community beyond campus to a semester teaching a course on tourism and travel writing in Florence, Italy. Email: lewisc@beloit.edu

work. In exploring these assessments and outcomes, we demonstrate how our approach offers principles and practices that can inform how students reflect on multimodality as both a practical tool and a productive trope for critical reflection and navigation of the classroom as (what Mary Louise Pratt coined as) a “contact zone.”

Keywords: reflexivity, intercultural communication, multimodal composition, experiential learning, postcolonialism

We recently taught a pair of linked three-week courses in and around Cusco, Peru. Lewis taught a creative writing course about travel and tourism in English; Quave taught a writing-intensive anthropology course. The shared learning objectives were to situate our experience in relation to the region’s history generally, as well as to travel and tourism today; to address how this region offers a rich site for formal investigation, creative expression, and personal reflection; and to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the similarities/differences between various discourses and modes of inquiry, representation, and expression. We taught courses that were predicated on immersive experiential learning, yet many students were traveling in a place where they did not speak either of the two principal languages (Spanish and Quechua).

Mary Louise Pratt (1991) defined *contact zones* as “the social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p. 34). Contact zones inform our work in teaching composition in short-term study abroad in two ways: 1) to situate Cusco as a classroom where students can encounter the material remains and human interactions resulting from being a contact zone over many centuries, and 2) to situate ourselves within Cusco and its asymmetrical relations of power that map onto the aftermaths of contact. Cusco society today is an outcome of the processes of Inca imperialism (Covey, 2006), Spanish colonialism (Lamana, 2008), and postcolonial identity formation (de la Cadena, 2000). It is thus a palimpsest of culture clashes, where multilingualism follows from histories of linguistic marginalization, replacement, and revitalization, and where many of the students from a North American small liberal arts college had little relevant linguistic, travel, or research experience.

We posit that multimodal composition in multilingual contexts is one way to help students analyze their experiences of cultural immersion and participant observation. Multimodal writing in multilingual contexts is also a way to help students understand their experiences *around* spoken and written languages; that is to say, that paralinguistic (such as tone and volume) and extralinguistic (nonverbal aspects of language) information, as well as visual, aural, and tactile experiences, offers much in the way of cultural immersion

and participant observation (Selfe, 2009). Our teaching artifact describes course objectives, assignments and activities, and samples of student work to suggest how this approach offers principles and practices that can inform and enrich not only study-abroad pedagogies specifically but also teaching and learning experiences more generally that invite students to reflect on how multimodality is both a practical tool and a productive trope for critical reflection and navigation of the classroom as a contact zone (Pratt, 1991).

Paired courses for multimodal composition in a multilingual setting

Although students could enroll in either the anthropology or the creative writing course, our design and delivery was almost entirely coordinated and integrated, with significant overlap in assigned readings (most of which came from a common anthology of multidisciplinary materials and perspectives about Peru) and assignments, as well as many of the joint class discussions, excursions, and daily activities. Students in each class collaborated with, offered feedback to, and learned from each other both within and between the two sections, including exchanging work to remix and create new compositions (akin to Fraiberg's "knotworking" [2010]). In both courses, our students composed multimodal writing that featured a plurality of voices and epistemologies, including video, sound, photography, and creative and expository writing. Throughout the process, we instructors also collaborated: with different disciplinary training and expertise in this specific site, we worked to integrate two sets of learning goals in this particularly challenging pedagogical contact zone.

Over the three-week period, we spent multiple nights in various rural areas, large towns, and the city of Cusco. We visited peoples' homes (friends and strangers) to cook and eat, observed interactions in markets, explored ways that tourist economies had co-opted sacred spaces, and hiked to archaeological sites and important mountaintops. The students moved in and out of spaces that were predominantly English, Spanish, Quechua, or multilingual. Some spoke (little) Spanish, but none were familiar with Quechua, the primary indigenous language of the region.

Creative writing course (Lewis)

Lewis's course was entitled "The Writer As Traveler" to underscore not only the topical focus on travel and tourism, but also how travel could itself be a productive trope for thinking about the writing process. Moreover, the course was designed to suggest a number of registers for student exploration and encounter in this class as a "contact zone": their positions as travelers/tourists in Cusco, the connections between creative and critical academic writing, and the interplay between writing and photography. Insofar as language in creative writing is not only a tool but also the object of study, we wanted students to situate their creative practice in relation to issues around multimodality and multilingualism, such as the following: How does multilingualism/translation inform

creative practice? How do photography and writing differently inform or inflect subject-object position/relations of the traveler/tourist? How might these modes, in turn, entail aspects of temporality and performativity differently from video and speech?

Students engaged in a series of reading assignments from a range of disciplinary perspectives and genres (including fiction and poetry), all of which informed class discussion and their own work, which over the 3-week period included a series of ten “image-text” field assignments that combined 1-2 photographs / 200 words, as well as three 500-word compositions that integrated reading, observation, and experience. The latter was a more traditional set of critical expository essays and nonfictional or fictional narratives, whereas the exercises invited students to explore photography as a mode of documentation and expression, to consider how photography and writing as practices could generate and enrich each other conceptually or sequentially, and to explore the interplay of image and text in a composed multimodal field.

Anthropology course (Quave)

Quave’s writing-intensive course took a social historical approach to understanding the Cusco region as an outcome of long-term cultural change and continuity (with emphasis on the development of identities of race, ethnicity, gender, and class). The course compared urban and rural lifeways to understand the shape of social inequality in the region, and critically evaluated sources from multiple disciplines to convey Cusco’s inequality to diverse audiences. Students were asked to reflect on their roles as travelers and outsiders in a society that was not their own. Rather than roam the city in search of “exotic” images to capture (Scarles, 2012), we focused on extracting as little as possible, and on avoiding the tourist gaze so often indulged in educational tourism (Ypeij, 2012).

Students composed reflective and expository essays including prose, photography, videography, and physical artifacts of their experiences. For example, they crafted photo essays (textless) to convey some aspect of Cusco society to a nonexpert, built on the creative writing students’ work by responding to them with accessible blog posts, and wrote multiple research essays for non-anthropological audiences. Assignments included reflection on students’ roles as ethical visitors in a formerly colonized landscape.

Sample Assignments

All student work has been shared with permission. The image descriptions were later added by us for accessibility purposes.

Creative writing course (Lewis)

Below are samples from one student, Sean Beckford, in response to two of the image-text assignments. The first work reflects how students combined research and experience in their creative nonfiction. The second reflects a series of opportunities for them to address their own social positions in relation to—and as both cause and effect of—their photography and writing. Both of these assignments were submitted by Sean Beckford.

Image-text sample 1: Qoyllur Rit'i.

Prompt: Your reading of this festival offers background on the history, the event details, and some analysis about the cultural vectors in play. For this assignment, combine some details about the festival (observed and researched) with your own reflections on your thoughts and feelings during the day. Work on grounding your reflection in some concrete details informed by any image you took from the day. Consider experimenting with point of view visually and verbally. 150-250 words.

Student photo-text.

[Description: Photograph of a mountain landscape with blue sky, green grass, wide dirt path, donkeys loaded with plastic packs, and a man walking between them.]

For centuries the Sinakara Valley has always been covered in snow for the advent of the Qoyllur Rit'i pilgrimage, culminating in thousands of indigenous peasants cutting blocks of ice from the glacier to share its healing powers with their communities. With the significant retreat of the glacier brought about by climate change, this ceremony has ceased in a sorrowful attempt to preserve the resource. Similarly, the once snow-covered Sinakara Valley is now a dry pastoral landscape with islands of grass and scattered llama farms.

The dust clung in our throats, eyes and noses. It whipped up behind burro hooves and clusters of boots. While we gasped for air against the mossy sides of the trail, five-year-olds skipped by giggling at our incompetence. Their parents moved confidently, shouldering crosses, framed pictures of Christ, swaddled infants and cooking stoves on their backs. Many indigenous pilgrims stopped at specific rock cairns to light a candle on their way to the summit. Near the end of the ascent, hawkers called out with offers of faux thousand dollar bills, incense, llama statues and toy cars. These would be purchased and then sacrificed on the mountain in hopes that Lord Qoyllur Rit'i would grant them wealth, healthy livestock or a new car in the coming year.

A horse lay on its side, seizing in utter exhaustion. Its hooves were too tired to kick out at those passing. The crush of humans jostling each other for position surged and stalled when the only remaining space to move into was the gorge below. Finally, the basecamp came into view from a bluff. As we stumbled down the final leg of the descent, decorated Inca saints brushed the dust off of our arms and the calls of, trucha, trucha frita hit our ears.

Commentary. A significant element of this creative writing course focused on the relationship between expository writing (academic) and creative nonfictional narration in terms of setting, chronology, character, action, and point of view, and language, with an emphasis on concrete details, especially how the latter are often depicted in visual terms (the concept of an “image,” etc.). Photography in this sense offers creative writing students both a literal and figurative point of reference—as trope, as source, and even as a kind of multimodal substrate. The broader takeaway here for instructors is two-fold: to consider how academic writing can productively deploy creative writing techniques and assignments, as well as how the photograph can help articulate relevant issues both thematically and formally to interrogate and advance students’ practice as language users situated in the “contact zone” of academic culture.

Image-text sample 2: the camera as a tool that poses a problem.

Prompt: Ever since photography was invented, it has posed a number of problems and debates: Is a photograph objective documentation or creative expression? Is a photograph “authentic” or not? Do photographs help us to see or get in the way of seeing? Do they connect us to people and places and experiences or do they get in the way? Does taking a photograph change (if only by reinforcement or reification) our relationship with our subject? Can a still-image tell a story or make an argument? What is the relationship between a photograph and memory? Take or select a “problem” photograph and write about this problem, or, conversely, pick one of these issues to write about and choose/take a photograph that captures or illustrates this problem.

Student photo-text.



[Description: Photograph of elderly Cusqueña woman wearing apron and working at a table piled with chicken, cheese, and breads; Coca-cola and Inca-cola bottles below the table]

Just beyond the cover of a shoulder blade, between an armpit. How far from your subject must you be before you are the invisible observer, before the discomfort in your chest fades when their gaze hits you, your calculating lens? At what cost will you pay to take your shot?

You stole this photograph. In that burst of photons her image-rights hadn't been compensated in soles, in Qoyllur Rit'ii platters. Social mores dictated a purchase, after which you may twist her face, her culture and food into any narrative of your choosing. But you stole this photograph.

Commentary. Throughout the course, the students read and discussed a range of issues pertaining to their positions as tourists in Peru (from colonial history to their creative practice), which included the question of language. This exercise invited students to experience and reflect on their use of photography as both a tool for navigating and an artifact of these complicated issues. The broader takeaway here for instructors (whether in on-site excursions or regular classrooms) is to consider not only how to enable students to use photography as a “capture technology” for ideas and experiences, but also how to deploy it as a teaching and learning medium that might be cast as a “rupture technology.” These artifacts, in turn, can be especially productive as points of reference in students’ ongoing iterative exchanges about these classroom materials/issues.

Anthropology course (Quave)

We include one example of multimedia writing from the anthropology course. This work was written in a portion of the course in which students had already learned the broad chronologies of social change and continuity in Cusco and had been tasked with using image-capture to reflect on their own identities relative to those of the communities they were visiting. They had learned how scientific photography had been used to essentialize Cusqueño people and places for a foreign gaze and that image-capture does not come from a neutral, innocuous position. In this example, an anthropology student (who requested we publish their work anonymously) connects growing up bilingually with their navigation of multilingual space as an outsider looking into the Cusco landscape.

Multimedia essay prompt.

Before beginning the essay, you should review three “Image-Text” compositions by each of the students in the creative writing course. The reason for looking at their work is to build on or respond to a theme they explore. We also want you to think about how they are relating text to image. Ask the other students what considerations they made in creating their photo compositions and connecting image to text, as well as how they connected to readings assigned in the course.

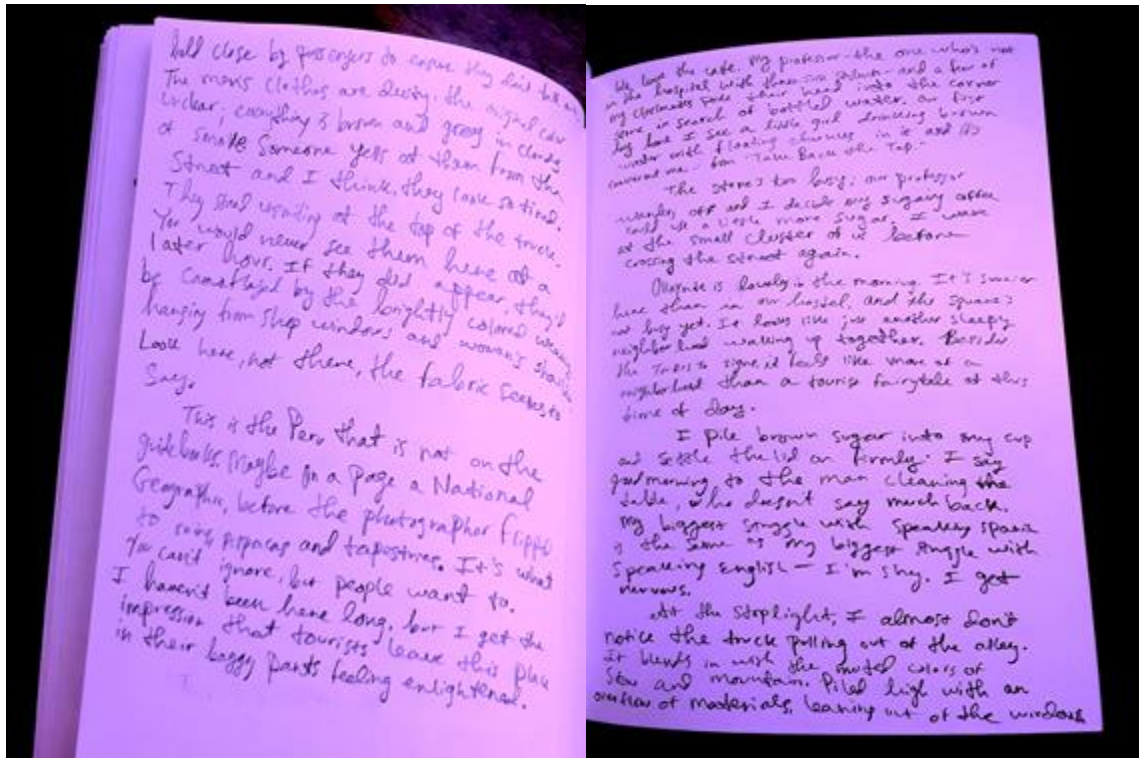
Convey a unifying thesis using at least three methods of communication (e.g., text, sound, image, video, tweet, etc.). Format this assignment as if it were a blog for an audience outside of Cusco and outside of our course. You may use multiple modes incidental to the narrative you are constructing or you may make the

multiple mediums the subject of your essay. Be creative, relevant, and accessible to your reader.

Student work sample.

This excerpt excludes some video, photos, and text that had been included in the original.

Mirrors



[Description: Photograph of handwritten pages with the text written below]



[Description: Ten digitally drawn green leaves that are falling.]

We leave the cafe. My professor—the one who’s not in the hospital with three sick students—and a few of my classmates poke their head into the corner store in search of bottled water. Our first day here I see a little girl drinking brown water with floating chunks in it and it’s converted me from “Take Back the Tap”.

The store's too busy; our professor wanders off and I decide my sugary coffee could use a little more sugar. I wave at the small cluster of us before crossing the street again.

Ollantaytambo is lovely in the morning. It's sunnier here than in our hostel, and the square's not busy yet. It looks like just another sleepy neighborhood waking up together. Besides the TOURISTO signs, it feels like more of a home than a tourist fairytale at this time of day.

I pile brown sugar into my cup and settle the lid on firmly. I say good morning to the man cleaning the table, who doesn't say much back. My biggest struggle with speaking Spanish is the same as my biggest struggle with speaking English—I'm shy. I get nervous.

At the stoplight, I almost don't see the truck pulling out of the alley. It blends in with the muted colors of stone and mountain. Piled high with an overflow of materials, leaning out of the windows, held close by passengers to ensure they don't fall out. The men's clothes are dusty, the original color unclear; everything is brown and grey in clouds of smoke. Someone yells at them from the street and I think, they look so tired. They stand unsmiling at the top of the truck. You would never see them here at a later hour. If they did appear, they'd be camouflaged by the brightly colored weavings hanging from shop windows and women's shoulders. Look here, not there, the fabric seems to say.



[Description: Photograph of red spondylus shell pendants arranged as a necklace;
Photograph of a drawn and watercolored flower]

This is the Peru that is not on the guidebooks. Maybe on a page in National Geographic, before the photographer flipped to ruins, alpacas, and tapestries. It's what you can't ignore, but people want you to. I haven't been here long, but I get the impression that tourists leave this place in their baggy pants feeling enlightened.

It's a running joke with my friends that there are gaps in my education. Like how for the longest I didn't know Spain was in Europe. And then beloit gave me a grant to take art classes in barcelona, and did you know, the spanish speak spanish wrong? It sounds ugly when they say it, it doesn't sound alive. When i think of spanish i think of my name with a b instead of a v, i think of my first love in spanglish, food carts outside of my chicago schools with the tamales and elotes and pork rinds and slushies. I hear my friends mom and my lunch group and jon and never learning to drive because of marcos' eyelashes. My cousins and their backyard parties.

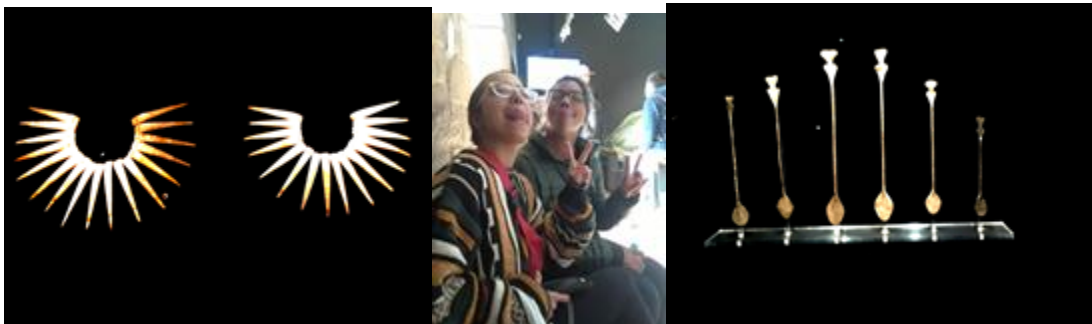
Spain falls flat. It's funny, like they're the original but not really, they're the bad test run.

And then coming here, spanish isn't even the first language, it's quechua and more, and spanish as i know it complicates. Like, the grocery store by my house, what language would those signs have been in? what would lolo's nickname in our group chat be if it weren't lo siento? and it sounds different again, because it's less proud, it's not claiming identity in displaced country, it's forced language and colonization. Still thicker than spanish spanish but it sounds a little sadder in my ears here. And im not as used to sad spanish and shy spanish, i know love spanish happy spanish bickering spanish, sad spanish is only in songs and phone calls home with bad news.





[Description: Two photographs of painted murals with Andean women deities, one in a mountain range with rainbow emanating from her wrist, another in the ocean with water flowing from her mouth.]



[Description: Three photographs: 1. Blurry image of a pair of red and white spondylus shell necklaces made from long triangular pendants; 2. Two young people seated making peace signs with tongues out; 3. Illuminated Andean silver spoons (6) in a museum case.]

You know how we talked about hipster colonialism? I think about that a lot. Like san blas, how people think it's cool to move in there and charge a lot of money for things locals couldn't afford. That's kind of like pilsen. I met this white girl who moved there from wisconsin and she wasn't paying rent or working she was just having fun in this place where she didn't really belong and where no one else could afford to live like that. Same problem different cities.

Commentary. In this multimedia essay, the student relied on personal experience and hints at what they had researched while in Cusco to develop a comparison of their experiences in multilingual environments at home and away. They used their own disorientation in bilingualism to mirror the “forced language and colonization” they encounter in the Andes today. Although the reader might not be in on all the references, this essay still evokes the experience of learning in a new environment that is something like but not at all the same as home.

Conclusion

Many of our students pointed to language histories as foundational for analyzing the formation of identities in the Andes in the five hundred years since European conquest. They developed an ear for differentiating Spanish and Quechua and participated in cultural activities where they had to interpret social and political meaning with extralingual, paralingual, aural, visual, and tactile information. They crafted multimodal written work intended to include outsiders from far away into these disorienting yet illuminating experiences with the palimpsest of Cusco 500 years on from Spanish contact. Ethical, reflexive study abroad is made possible through promoting multilingual environments as texts to be interpreted in multimodal writing. Pratt’s “perils of writing in the contact zone” (1991: 37)—including misunderstanding, linguistic incomprehension, and multiply interpreted meanings—are rather the most productive learning spaces in a short-term study abroad program.

Acknowledgements

We thank the two students who contributed their work here for their permission to use their course materials. We appreciate the contributions from Allen Reed and the Beloit College Anthropology Department, as well as the Summer Blocks Program, who made these courses possible. We are also grateful to Jesús Lucana for his assistance during these courses in Cuzco. Thank you to the issue editors Shyam Pandey, Ai-Chu Elisha Ding, and Santosh Khadka for their helpful feedback on this essay.

References

- Covey, R. A. (2006). *How the Incas built their heartland: State formation and the innovation of imperial strategies in the Sacred Valley, Peru*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- de la Cadena, M. (2000). *Indigenous Mestizos: The politics of race and culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919-1991*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Fraiberg, S. (2010). Composition 2.0: Toward a Multilingual and Multimodal Framework. *College Composition and Communication*, 62(1), 100–126.
- Lamana, G. (2008). *Domination without Dominance: Inca-Spanish Encounters in Early Colonial Peru*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Pratt, M. L. (1991). Arts of the Contact Zone. *Profession*, 33–40.
- Scarles, C. (2012). The Photographed Other: Interplays of Agency in Tourist Photography in Cusco, Peru. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(2), 928–950.
- Selfe, C. L. (2009). The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing. *College Composition and Communication*, 60(4), 616–663.
- Ypeij, A. (2012). The Intersection of Gender and Ethnic Identities in the Cuzco-Machu Picchu Tourism Industry: Sácamefotos, Tour Guides, and Women Weavers. *Latin American Perspectives*, 39(6), 17–35.