

# Italy: Everyday Another Soulful Experience to Bring Back Home

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## Abstract

This course uses students' personal experience abroad to enhance their integration into Italian culture, and to develop better understanding of the host culture, home culture and themselves. In this poster, statements are taken word for word from student papers describing, interpreting and evaluating actual incidents.

Students write papers related to weekly topics using three basic points of focus: Description, Interpretation and Evaluation (D.I.E.). Each paper focuses on experiences, situations and incidents taken from daily life in Siena. This structure encourages students to process their cross-cultural experiences on a deeper level. The definitions for each section of the D.I.E. include:

- ◆ **Description:** What do I see?  
The first part of the students' paper consists of a careful description, as full and rich as possible, of the assigned event or topic. Choosing their wording carefully to avoid judgmental language and interpretation, they include descriptive detail about any aspect that they feel is meaningful for their understanding, remembering not to engage in interpretation or analysis in this part of the paper.
- ◆ **Interpretation:** What do I think that means? (From American and Italian perspectives)  
In the second part of the paper, they interpret the cultural meaning and significance of the incident from their own point of view.
- ◆ **Evaluation:** What do I feel?  
In the final paragraph, American students make first-best-guess judgment. At this time they can voice personal reactions, surprise, disappointment and enthusiasm.
- ◆ **Second Evaluation:** A new evaluation is written after an interpretation exercise with visiting Italian students. In American students ask the visiting Italian students to interpret the same situation, and solicit feedback and further information about the Italian interpretation from their partners. Based on the information collected, American students write a short summary of what they learned about the Italian interpretation, rethinking their initial interpretations and evaluations, and making their new changeable, adaptable judgments.

Meeting local people in this academic context allows our students the opportunity not only to adjust expectations and learn how locals behave in various situations, but to explore *why* they do these things--the basic values, beliefs, and assumptions that lie behind the behavior. Both American and Italian students enjoy these meetings. They develop their understanding of different cultures and recognize that everything can be perceived from different perspectives.

The course ends with a final performance, in which all students collaborate and perform in their "Cultural Sketches," revealing the real story of life in Siena. Working in groups, they create skits that are lively and entertaining but also culturally accurate, including aspects of general Italian style, body language, hand gestures, idiomatic expressions; students are told to act as Italians would.

The American student leaves for Italy carrying invisible "cultural baggage," full of his patterns of behavior, values, beliefs and norms. That baggage influences adaptation abroad, since it contains the values important to the student and the patterns of behavior customary in his or her culture. Through the D.I.E. papers and other activities (readings, role plays, small group tasks, cultural sketches, guest speakers, films and fieldtrips), students learn how to interpret events from different perspectives and are ready to go back home, with invisible cultural baggage full of new skills.