

CHAPTER 4

Learning as Salon:  
Honors International Collaboration

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**INTRODUCTION**

In May 2011, Dutch students from the honors program in geosciences of Utrecht University, led by Professor Marca Wolfensberger, engaged in an experimental-learning project in Paris, France, with a group of American students from the honors program of Columbia College, South Carolina, led by Professors Christine Hait, Corinne Mann, and John Zubizarreta. Literally and figuratively, the city of Paris served as a salon for the project: a place where rational discussion, cross-cultural dialog, collaborative

learning, and culminating critical reflection about the uniqueness and value of the learning process itself were stimulated by the informal setting of a vibrant international city that provided the context for the two groups of students to explore the topics of expatriate artist culture and film history in Paris, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One of the guiding principles of the international venture is the recognition that “learning as salon” is an enrichment of the successful, NCHC-trademarked City as Text™ pedagogical model that is well known in American honors circles. In such an approach to teaching and learning, the material landscape gains special meaning as active learners incorporate place-specific and other applicable content in discussions that occur on location. By detailing our extraordinary experiences in Paris and locating our activities within the larger framework of what makes such active, honors-level learning so powerful, especially when enriched by international collaboration, we will examine the possibilities of the salon concept in honors education. Our hope is that the cross-cultural salon concept extends beyond our own situation and will stimulate honors programs in the United States, the Netherlands, and other countries to collaborate across international borders in designing experiential-learning opportunities like this Paris salon venture.

## **CONTEXT**

In fall 2010, Dr. John Zubizarreta led a number of invited workshops on honors education at several institutions in the Netherlands. During the visit, he discussed a plan to offer a study-travel trip to Paris with a small number of honors students scheduled to enroll in a required spring-semester senior seminar with an optional trip after the course. Taught primarily by an American literature scholar, with the help of a French professor and support from the college’s honors program, the course, “Paris in Film and Literature,” offered students a chance to explore Paris’s unique culture of multi-national expatriates and its galvanizing role in the influential French New Wave film movement. Course discussions revolved around the amazing phenomenon of how many great artists of

diverse genres and countries migrated to Paris during the modernist period, making the city a cultural magnet for many avant-garde innovations in art, music, dance, literature, and film. An optional study-travel excursion to Paris would transform students' classroom knowledge into deep, active learning, the kind of intellectual growth that, when combined with practical applications and opportunities to make interdisciplinary and personal connections, characterizes City as Text™ pedagogical strategies. Their learning would be materialized in real life.

As a model of one of many strategies that distinguish honors education, the Paris journey underscored the power of City as Text™ approaches to study-travel, shifting students' attitudes from being simple tourists and superficial consumers of another culture to being critical observers and active learners, to making study-travel a collaborative, reflective, intellectual endeavor. The effectiveness of such methodology is well documented in the vast research on experiential learning. John Dewey, David Kolb, Benjamin S. Bloom, and other educational theorists underscore the value of doing or application and connecting or synthesis in deep learning, and the Association for Experiential Education <<http://www.aee.org>> is one example of the many online resources available on the subject. The honors domain benefits from the valuable work of Bernice Braid, Ada Long, Joan Digby, and Peter Machonis, whose NCHC monographs on the benefits of experiential learning reinforce the message that accumulation of knowledge, traditional classroom work, and concentration on recall are not sufficient in moving students from surface acquisition of subject matter to significant, lasting, transformative learning. The lesson was eminently clear in the Paris salon idea that Zubizarreta shared with interested Dutch instructors and honors students.

Honors colleague Marca Wolfensberger of Holland's Utrecht University responded enthusiastically to the suggestion that such pedagogy could be enhanced by crossing cultural boundaries and bringing together honors students from different countries in a specific place. Such an enterprise would also facilitate the expansion of honors, in general, and NCHC's influence, in particular,

into international arenas. The idea of an experimental international collaboration between students of American and Dutch honors programs took hold, and the salon concept, so prevalent in Parisian cultural history, became the framing metaphor of the project because of the French salon's emphasis on intimate gatherings, animated discussions, critical reflection, interdisciplinarity, intellectual rigor, and inclusive diversity of voices—all complementary facets of honors teaching and learning. And so we planned an experiential salon in Paris for the following spring.

## PARISIAN SALONS

The Parisian Salon has undergone significant change since its inception in the sixteenth century when French kings imported it from their Italian neighbors. Upon arrival in France, the salon initially found its place, as literary circles, in the homes of the middle- and lower-ranking nobility. By the seventeenth century, although remaining open to the diversity of classes and disciplines, the salon incorporated one important restriction, accepting only those of so-called polite society. In the eighteenth century, the salon tradition took on one of its most important societal roles in becoming the inarguably revered haven for the exchange of ideas related to the very real possibility of social change. During this historic period, the Enlightenment ruled in Parisian salons. In the private homes of the salon keepers, most of whom were enlightened, upper-class women, the *philosophes* would gather to discuss, among other topics, the ideals underlying the questions of liberty and equality that would eventually lead to the French Revolution. Interestingly, as the French Revolution began, a marked decline occurred in such intellectual gatherings as the revolutionaries—sons of the salons, themselves—“suppressed” such “private gatherings” precisely because of their strong influence on public opinion. Indeed, after the French Revolution, the salon genuinely became a marginalized social happening (Spayde and Sandra 11).

One of these marginalized groups, which makes its appearance in the years just preceding World War I, was led by Gertrude Stein, a salonist of great renown. The gatherings at her home at 27 rue de

Fleurtus attracted salon enthusiasts from all walks of life, from a diversity of professional backgrounds, and from across the world. Stein's salon not only embraced the characteristics of the traditional Parisian salon but was also quite cross-cultural.

Although the Parisian salon declined around the time of the French Revolution, the ideals of the Parisian salon as an informal public space, inviting intellectual exchange among a group of diverse participants in terms of disciplinary orientation and class-rank, manifested themselves in the daily lives of Parisians in the form of café culture. In fact, a hybridization of the salon-café traditions occurred during the eighteenth century when the *philosophes* migrated from conversing at one of the recognized Parisian salons—be it Baron d'Holbach's (one of the few men who held a salon) or Madame Geoffrin's—to gathering at favored spots such as the *Procope*, one of the oldest Parisian cafés found in the heart of the 6th arrondissement, home of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, the *Académie française*, and the French intelligentsia in general.

The movement from the structured setting of the private home to the genuinely public space of the café, found at the heart of the Parisian district and intimately linked to the city's intellectual pulse, is but a step. Indeed, these encounters are today most known and embraced by those, such as our international honors group, interested in replicating the Parisian intellectual gatherings. The French cafés have long been the daily hang-outs of world-famous artists and intellectuals. *Les Deux Magots* was the favoured retreat of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir but also regularly visited by figures such as Pablo Picasso and Marcel Proust. Jean Cocteau's café, *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*, witnessed various discussions at different times, involving Igor Stravinsky, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Gauguin, Sinclair Lewis, Vladimir Lenin, and Ernest Hemingway. Many films feature establishments such as *Maxim's*, which was in Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* and was the favorite café of Maurice Chevalier's character in *Gigi*.

Through its heritage and its concrete manifestations, the salon, then, came to stand for an ideal. For authors such as German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the term *salon* became synonymous

with the abstract ideal of a place where intellectualism and sociability mix. According to Habermas, in the eighteenth century different countries in Europe saw the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere, where there was room for what he calls “rational-critical debate,” an open communication space where people can engage in public discourse, exchanging and critiquing ideas (160). He draws connections among the urbane, intellectual traditions that developed in British coffee houses, Germany’s eclectic dining clutches or *Tischgesellschaften*, and Parisian salons; more than just physical places for gathering over food or drink, these venues provided sophisticated, spirited occasions where intellectuals and artists met to discuss political movements and ideologies, art, science, and fashion (30–43). In salon culture, people from different occupations and nationalities gathered to partake in critical discussion about the important issues of their time. The discussions in such salons are never fixed, but they depend upon the contingent social and historical backgrounds of those engaged in the exchanges. The freedom of such collaborative discourse, the reliance on what each participant can bring to the conversation from his or her disciplinary expertise and personal connections, and the emphasis on utilizing the resources and influence of a unique gathering place play important roles in making the salon model an ideal structure for authentic collaborative learning in honors.

## LEARNING AS SALON

Our collaborative Paris project was an experimental effort to see if the ideal of learning as salon would work as an enrichment to the City as Text™ model. City as Text™ stresses how the urban landscape reflects the *zeitgeist* of a place; likewise, learning as salon underscores how a specific geographical location or ambience influences and materially shapes not only *what* but also *how* people learn. Paris, of course, offers myriad opportunities for exploration, but to gather in salon fashion focuses attention on how the special history and contours of the city’s salon culture foster the collaborative and inclusive critical discourse conducive to discussion of a particular subject in a particular place. In other words, our salon

conversations about international expatriate art and avant-garde film in Paris mirrored the very content of our study: the participants did not just read and write about the burgeoning Parisian salon culture of international expatriate artists during a specific number of decades and then explore the city to find evidence to support our learning; rather, we replicated the features of the salon to enrich the already considerable benefits of experiential learning. Salon blurred the boundary between learning and experience.

Learning as salon worked out extraordinarily well for this project. The group visited many historically significant sites, with a focus on the extraordinary convergence of international expatriate artists and innovative French filmmakers in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century. A large part of the time was spent onsite in salon-inspired discussions across the disciplinary concentrations of the students involved in this international collaboration. For these discussions we picked places that were especially suitable; for instance, the *Jardin du Luxembourg* has often been a gathering place for political dissidents but also for the display of political power. Here, the participants discussed Dutch, French, and American politics and political theory, linking the topics to different historical developments that have taken place in these countries and that can perhaps explain the differences. In the stimulating fashion of salon, the discussions ranged freely over wide intellectual territory, moving swiftly from social, political, philosophical, and artistic considerations to meta-level analysis of how learning as salon—situated in particular places where the Parisian salon itself thrived—provided the honors enhancement we envisioned for our international experiment. One of the students' written reflections captures the impact on her honors learning:

My favorite part of being in Paris was seeing the topics we covered in class—in the form of pictures, reports and student papers—materialize right in front of me. I completed a mini-report on the *Jardin du Luxembourg* and then to have a casual, Parisian lunch, complete with baguettes and brie, on the Luxembourg lawn was surreal. We were immersed in the city—literally on the doorsteps of the Latin

Quarter—and interacting with Parisians and other Europeans is the experience I value most now that I have returned home. We were able to wander through the *Louvre*, contemplating Mona Lisa's countenance, and then walk past the iconic glass pyramid to bustling Parisian streets to order food at a local vendor. In essence, we experienced both worlds of Paris by seeing renowned landmarks, such as *Musée de Orsay* and *Père Lachaise Cemetery*, while stopping [at] less prominent sites to drink a café and critically reflect on the meaning of the journey as not just a trip but a profound honors international learning experience.

The salon discussions constituted a means to visit a place and understand it. Location became a starting point for engaged conversations not only about the meaning of place or about any related content information but also about how place and pedagogy become one: learning as salon. The students used place to progress intellectually, to connect knowledge across disciplines and international experiences, and to realize the power of critical reflection; they understood how place and a specialized approach to teaching and learning are linked.

## **INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY**

Composed of students not only from different continents but also from different disciplinary fields of study, such as political science, history, geography, business, literature, art, and dance, the Paris group shared diverse points of view in the discussions, thereby reinforcing the quality of discourse and heightening expectations and standards for honors-level learning. These features of the collaboration brought the visit to Paris very close to the ideal of an authentic salon, a happening wherein artists and other intellectuals from different backgrounds meet in inspiring places to stimulate the growth of original ideas and the sharing of knowledge. Going beyond disciplinary borders, the group discussed historical, ideological, artistic, and social developments in Paris and compared



these developments in our own countries. As such, both international exchange and interdisciplinarity formed the essential core of their model of learning as salon.

## CONCLUSION

During their international collaboration in May 2011, the participants designed their own contemporary salon in Paris. Prior to coming together onsite, the students focused their learning on varied disciplinary content that could be synthesized in salon discussions situated in especially appropriate locations. Many of their conversations revolved around the material studied back home, to be sure, but also around how the group excursions, in City as Text™ mode, complemented individual study. But perhaps more significantly, especially in culminating reflections, the discussions also prompted the critically reflective insights gained while pondering how place and pedagogy, how learning as salon, provided an optimal occasion for higher-order learning and an honors approach to study-travel.

After departing from the City of Light, the students have stayed in touch quite extensively, an associated outcome of the intellectual and social camaraderie that is characteristic of salon culture. Thinking of learning as salon emphasizes the historically embedded and place-bound character of knowledge and provides a lively and inspiring method to study and share content among honors students from different cultural backgrounds and disciplinary fields. But for the implemented concept of salon to hold authentically and make the most difference in deepening and extending student learning, other essential elements include allowing students the authority to come up with ideas of their own, to challenge each other while constructing shared knowledge from diverse content areas, and to make the crucial connections between the particular character of place and the immersive process of teaching and learning in context. They can do so through the quality of discussions that occur in learning as salon. Coming together in Paris from honors programs in the Netherlands and the United States, the participants made this exciting experimental and experiential honors undertaking of learning as salon a great success, one that perhaps

other honors programs within and outside the United States will adapt to further the innovative pedagogies and characteristics that programs worldwide cite when defining, realizing, and transforming what we mean by honors.

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