

To: Dr. Jessika Satori, CITD Director

From: Karen Hammer, CITD Grant Recipient

Re: CITD funded study abroad in Italy

Date: May 14, 2009

### Ten Things Learned or Accomplished Through Study Abroad

CITD grant money helped fund my study abroad experience in Italy from March 25 through May 5, 2009. As a Spanish instructor on sabbatical leave, I chose to pursue studies of the Italian language and to experience the beginnings of the process of acquiring a third language late in life. Following are some of the things I learned or accomplished.

- 1) Italy was not unified as a country until after 1861. Unification brought together many regions and kingdoms where diverse languages or dialects were spoken. The extremely mountainous terrain of the Italian peninsula and the isolation caused by this geographic feature are also factors that have contributed to linguistic diversity in Italy. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s when television became more widespread throughout Italy that many people became exposed to what is known as the “standard” Italian dialect. This dialect of Italian originated in the Tuscan region of Italy, where Florence is situated. Even though I attended language school in Florence, I learned that when traveling outside of Florence I would be exposed to other dialects that I would not understand. In fact, many of the Italian dialects are not mutually comprehensible by native Italian speakers.
- 2) I was concerned that once I left Florence and traveled in the south of Italy I would not be able to discern if my lack of comprehension was due to insufficient language skills or because dialect was being spoken. Success: When traveling in southern Italy on several occasions I was able to distinguish between dialect and standard spoken Italian.
- 3) I began study of Italian at home in January and worked independently for 10 weeks in preparation for my trip. I started with zero knowledge of the language and hoped that upon arrival at the language school I might be placed in level 3.

- However, because I did so well on the written placement test they actually placed me in level 4. This was somewhat traumatic because I had had no real oral practice prior to arriving in Italy. The oral component of the course was very stressful, but I managed to remain in level 4 during the month at Centro Fiorenza.
- 4) Accomplished - The common European framework for language skills defines my skill level as the following: “Can take part in conversations on familiar topics, can easily communicate while traveling in Italy, can understand main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters: work, school, leisure, etc.” This is a big achievement in a short span of time.
  - 5) I learned that Pinocchio was written in 1883 by a Tuscan writer who lived in a small village outside of Florence, which explains why Pinocchio dolls are for sale all over Florence. In fact, a Pinocchio woodcarver has a shop called “Maestro Geppetto” a few doors down from Centro Fiorenza. I was inspired to buy a copy of the original book in Italian and read it while in Italy, all 200 pages. It’s written at a junior reader level.
  - 6) My teacher recommended an Italian novel to me that would not be too difficult to read. I started reading it on the flight home and I’ve almost finished the novel. It really is beyond my current skill level, and I gloss over a lot of the vocabulary I don’t understand and reread many portions, but I am able to follow the basic story. This accomplishment far exceeds my goals or expectations.
  - 7) I learned that students come from all over the world to study Italian at Centro Fiorenza, and while I was there I met students from the following countries: Korea, China, Japan, Australia, England, Switzerland, Austria, Sweden and Germany. The only student I met from the US is a native speaker of Spanish who was born in Peru. The students ranged in age from 16 – 64.
  - 8) The most common answer to my question, “Why are you studying Italian?” was, “Because I love Italy. I love Italian...I think it’s a beautiful language.” This confirmed for me a belief that language operates on a very affective level, and that students should be given options in choosing a foreign language, based not only on practical considerations but also taking into account natural affinities.

- 9) I learned that Italy, which used to be a country people emigrated from, has become a country of immigrants. Internet businesses in Florence were typically staffed by North Africans, and it is not unusual for the pizza you eat to be made by Egyptians. More than three thousand people have died in the last 20 years while trying to cross from North Africa to Sicily. During my stay in Italy several boats sank in this stretch of water.
- 10) Many people in Florence commute to work by bicycle or some form of motorcycle/motor scooter. It is quite common to see men in full business suits with a woolen scarf around their neck getting to and around town on old bicycles. It took me a while to figure out why Italians were walking around in winter coats, boots, and scarves on days when the temperature was headed for a high of 68 -70 degrees. It's because many of them leave home early in the morning and return late in the day on motorbikes, and the wind chill requires that they bundle up. So when American students might be heading out the door in shorts and flip flops, many Italians were wearing wool coats and scarves.