

# NAVIGATING IDENTITY AND BELONGING

## REFLECTING ON MY STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE IN BELIZE

By Sandra Anita Moss  
*University of Southern Mississippi*

I've always believed in the power of learning—not just in classrooms, but through lived experience. As a nearly 60-year-old PhD student with a background in education and a deep love for biodiversity, I didn't think twice when the opportunity to study abroad in Belize appeared when a fellow classmate serving as an undergrad instructor of record cajoled me to give it a try. What I didn't fully anticipate was how this journey would challenge and reshape my sense of self, both as a learner and as a person navigating identity, age, and belonging in unfamiliar territory.

This reflection is more than a travel story. It's a candid exploration of what it means to be a mature student immersed in a group of mostly undergraduate peers, learning side by side in the vibrant landscapes of Belize. Along the way, I was pushed—physically, intellectually, and emotionally—to rethink what aging looks like, what learning can feel like, and where I fit within the broader concept of global citizenship. Through moments of challenge, connection, and quiet contemplation, this experience became not just about tropical ecology, but about reclaiming and reimagining my place in the world.

Belize has always been a bucket list trip. Dive magazines showed the colorful brilliance of the barrier reef and the fish that occupied it with a spectacular flourish. When I (a 60-year-old PhD student with two newly replaced knees) was presented the opportunity to participate in a Tropical Ecology study abroad course in Belize, I didn't hesitate to join. My love for plants and biodiversity outweighed any physical challenges that may have factored into my decision to participate. I checked my familial and domestic responsibilities at the gate as I boarded a United Airlines flight on January 2, 2025, to spend the next 16 days in the tropics.

As I landed, there was still no glimpse of what lay ahead. I was eager to jump in and explore both my wanderlust and nature. As I waited patiently in the 40-minute Belize Customs line, I joked, listened, and engaged with my fellow travelers. Many had traveled to Belize before and were frequent visitors or were returning to their second home. I was fascinated by their love for the culture, people, and place they had found in Belize. Interestingly, it didn't escape me that I was in a line of hundreds, yet I was the only person of color except for the Belizeans who worked for the airport, Customs, or security. The frequent questions I had about my shirt which read, "Study Abroad" and "USM," revealed a lot. Not one person surmised I was a student! The assumption was that I worked for the University.

This was the first of many instances on this trip in which I would be made aware that my status as a mature student was somewhat unusual. From a social construction perspective, my identity as a student was continuously shaped and reshaped by the social context and the perceptions of others. I found myself at times wanting to say I was a professor because "student" didn't quite fit the identity I had carved for four decades. This illustrates how identity is not static but influenced by societal norms and expectations regarding age and roles (Gergen & Gergen, 2001; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

Sure, it was easy to say I was a student of life or that I am constantly learning as an educator, but I had a full-time job when those words easily slid from my lips. Now, when I said I was a

student, my pride in leaving everything to pursue a PhD was mixed with the angst of, “Oh God, I’m a student!” The mixture of people’s perceptions slid from awe, “You’re brave,” to disgust, “Why would any grown woman go back for that punishment?” From a social representation perspective, these reactions highlighted the collective beliefs and attitudes towards aging and education, showing how these societal narratives influence individual experiences and self-perception (Romaoli & Contarello, 2021). Mature students’ counter-narratives to the construction of aging as decline defined these negative collective perceptions and beliefs as studying and learning as a privilege of youth (Romaoli & Contarello, 2021).

I’m rarely speechless, but standing there in that line, I didn’t know what to say to the comments, as for the first time, I was equally sliding from sure to unsure during those 40 minutes. This is where the story begins, reflecting on how this experience affected my sense of identity, belonging, and global citizenship. The narrative of my journey, both internal and external, became a powerful tool for making sense of my experience, aligning with a narrative perspective. Through storytelling, I began to construct meaning from my experiences, weaving together my identity as a student, a mature learner, and a global citizen.

As I slung a duffle bag on my back and a backpack on the front, I walked to the baggage area; my ride was waiting for me on the other side, and I was excited. The whisper of my age had wormed its way into my consciousness, and now it had settled like an uneasy itch that I couldn’t scratch. Was my very existence as a student challenging notions of ageism? Has society changed enough that my slight eye wrinkles and graying temples offer a new paradigm of what aging looks like? Am I ready for the 4-mile hikes through the rainforest? Or the hours of snorkeling along the Belize Barrier Reef? Like the fungus *Cordyceps*, which grows parasitically on organisms, the idea that my age might hinder me from keeping up with my 20-something peers began to take root. Just as *Cordyceps* overtakes and ultimately kills its host, would I allow society’s perceptions of age—intellectually and physically—to control me, becoming a dream killer? Was I succumbing to the mainstream notion that mature individuals are less capable than their younger peers? I’m shocked at myself for even entertaining the thought.

On the long drive to the first stop, the Tropical Education Center, I encountered the first of many thought-provoking moments on the trip. As I was introduced to one of the Center’s caretakers, I was asked if I was one of the professors. “No, I’m a student,” I replied, followed by an uncomfortable silence and a nervous laugh from the worker. This interaction further underscored the tension between societal expectations and personal identity, highlighting the ongoing negotiation of self in a context where age, role, and perception intersect.

## ROOMING EXPECTATIONS

The only apprehension I had coming into the trip was living arrangements. Rooming with an 18–22-year-old who wasn’t my child did leave me feeling a little, well, weird. I go to sleep early and get up frequently throughout the night. Will that disturb someone? My one apprehension meant nothing the entire trip, I’m happy to say. Is that because I found solace with my headphones on, and my bunkmates slept like a log when I had to don my headlamp, creep out, unlock the door, open the squeaky screen door, and cross the porch to the end of the hall to the group bathroom with no nighttime lights or hot water? But, hey, I was in Belize.

Research on intergenerational living arrangements suggests that older adults often express concerns about compatibility with younger individuals due to differences in routines, habits, and

lifestyle preferences (Cabib et al., 2022). However, studies have also shown that such arrangements can lead to positive outcomes when common interests and mutual respect are fostered (Scharlach et al., 2013). This seemed to hold true in my case, as the rest of my stay was with another younger mature student, 20 years my junior. We found solace in maturity, nature, and shared life experiences, bridging the generational gap through our shared connection to the environment and similar life stages. This underscores the importance of shared values and experiences in fostering meaningful intergenerational relationships, aligning with research indicating that such connections can enhance well-being and social integration for older adults (Scharlach et al., 2013).

The living arrangements may have been my only apprehension going into the Belize Study Abroad program, but it was evident my focus was education, where some of my younger peers thought of the learning as an inconvenience. My advanced academic background deeply shaped my approach to the experience, aligning with principles from adult learning theories such as andragogy. According to the theory of andragogy (Knowles et al., 1998), adult learners are self-directed, motivated by internal factors, and bring a wealth of personal experience to the learning process. I wanted to absorb everything the instructors, rangers, guides, and other students were teaching, driven by a desire for personal and professional growth. I approached each activity with intentionality, eager to explore and experience the environment slowly and methodically, reflecting a mature learner's goal-oriented and experiential approach.

In contrast, many of my undergraduate peers, possibly influenced by their developmental stage as described by Perry's (1999) theory of intellectual and ethical development, seemed more focused on the social aspects of the trip. Their learning experience appeared more exploratory and less structured, often engaging in social interactions and recreational activities like playing music during hikes and birding sessions. This contrast highlights the various stages of cognitive and emotional development. Perry's theory suggests that younger students often view knowledge as dualistic—right or wrong—while more mature learners tend to appreciate the complexity and relativity of knowledge, seeking deeper understanding and integration. My approach veered towards eco-pedagogy as the spirituality of nature and ruins was felt within, and I welcomed the solitude in many places.

This divergence in focus could be attributed to the differing life stages and educational priorities. As an adult learner nearing the completion of my PhD, I viewed this opportunity as a critical component of my academic and professional trajectory, with a finite number of working years remaining. My younger peers, on the other hand, likely saw this as one of many formative experiences in their academic journeys, with a longer career horizon ahead. This aligns with Erikson's (1950) stages of psychosocial development, where I am in the stage of generativity versus stagnation, focusing on leaving a legacy and achieving long-term goals, while my younger peers are navigating identity versus role confusion, exploring who they are and their place in the world (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). This could be seen in our mandatory daily journal entries as my thoughts and experiences were carefully crafted for me to remember my emotions, learning, and situations that I thoughtfully entered daily while my peers would go days without entries and play catch up on the bus heading to new destinations.

This multifaceted contrast between my approach and that of my undergraduate peers underscores the impact of age, life stage, and educational intent on the study abroad experience, shaping not only how we engaged with the environment but also how we internalized and valued the learning process. While walking with my professor on one of the difficult hikes where I was

unable to keep up with my peers, I remarked to him that it would be great to have a study abroad experience with peers my age because I could find similarities in mind, effect, intent, and speed.

### PERSONAL IDENTITY GROWTH

My time in Belize was transformative, offering both subtle and profound shifts in my identity. The cultural immersion forced me to confront and reconsider aspects of who I am, my place in the world, and how I relate to others.

One of the most significant changes was a deeper appreciation for community and interconnectedness. Belizean culture, with its emphasis on communal living, shared experiences, and a close relationship with nature highlighted the importance of living in harmony with others and the environment. It was a unique experience seeing cultures living and breathing their heritage—the Maya at Maya Centre, the Garifuna of Stann Creek, and the Kriol at Gales Point Manatee. This was a stark contrast to the more individualistic culture I was accustomed to in the States, where neighbors rarely say hello. I found myself embracing these communal values, which reaffirmed my commitment to fostering more meaningful relationships and living more sustainably back home.

Additionally, navigating my identity as a mature student in a group predominantly composed of younger individuals challenged my preconceived notions about age and capability. Initially, I was self-conscious about being older, wondering if I could keep up physically and intellectually. However, as the days progressed, I realized that my age and life experiences were assets, not liabilities. At times, the terrain, mud, and climbing in and out of swaying boats slowed me, but it didn't affect my identity in a negative way much. Instead, it reassured me that, although my balance and endurance had seen better days as a Division 1 track athlete, I could still climb steadily and push myself beyond any limits I had imposed after the multiple knee surgeries and added weight. I became more confident in my abilities, both physically and intellectually, to contribute uniquely to the group, providing a perspective rooted in years of personal and professional growth. This reaffirmed my belief in lifelong learning and the value of diverse experiences in educational settings.

The cultural immersion also led to a stronger sense of global citizenship. Engaging with local communities, understanding their challenges, and witnessing their resilience broadened my worldview. I felt a stronger connection to global issues and a renewed commitment to advocating for environmental sustainability and social justice, both in my personal life and academic pursuits. As an educator by trade and spirit, every day fascinated me as I wondered and thought about how I could bring to life what I was experiencing—the Maya cities of Cahal Pech and Xunantunich, the Belize Barrier Reef off of Belize City and Stann Creek and preserves like the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, Jaguar Reserve Nature Center, St. Herman's Blue Hole National Park, and Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary—to children around the world.

In essence, the experience in Belize not only enriched my understanding of the world but also led to a reaffirmation of my values and a redefinition of my identity. It reinforced my belief in the power of education, the importance of community, and the potential for growth at any stage of life. This journey was a reminder that personal identity is fluid and continuously shaped by our experiences and interactions with the world around us.

## GROUP DYNAMICS: MOMENTS OF CONNECTION AND ISOLATION

Throughout the trip, navigating group dynamics with undergraduate students was a nuanced experience, filled with both moments of connection and instances of isolation. Initially, I felt a natural separation due to the age difference and divergent life stages. Their energetic chatter and casual approach to the experience often contrasted with my more reflective and purposeful engagement. This sometimes led to feelings of isolation, particularly during social gatherings where their conversations revolved around topics that felt distant from my current life stage. It was as if I were sitting at a table with my adult children, but I had no familial connection, just a shared experience.

However, moments of connection emerged as we spent more time together. Shared experiences, such as long hikes, snorkeling trips, and group discussions, served as equalizers. Conversations about the beauty of the Belizean landscape, the challenges of fieldwork, and the shared awe of our surroundings created common ground. These interactions fostered a sense of camaraderie that transcended age. I found that my willingness to listen and share stories from my own life resonated with some of the students, leading to meaningful exchanges and mutual respect, and by the end of the course, yes, a few started calling me Ms. Sandy.

## CULTURAL INTEGRATION: SENSE OF BELONGING IN THE BELIZEAN COMMUNITY

My sense of belonging within the Belizean community fluctuated throughout the trip. Certain experiences made me feel warmly included, like drumming and dancing with Kriol Belizeans at Manatee Lodge, while others highlighted my status as an outsider. The full moon traditional music night made me feel a deep connection to the people and their way of life. The openness and hospitality of the Belizeans were palpable, making these moments feel genuine and inclusive.

Conversely, there were times when cultural and racial differences created a subtle barrier. Being the only person of color among the group of travelers and not Belizean occasionally led to moments of feeling othered. I was often mistaken for a Belizean, which led to a conflicting sense of identity, knowing they felt a sense of camaraderie with me but also feeling the disappointment when I shared that I was not. While Belizeans were welcoming, the occasional curiosity or assumption about my role—whether I was a professor, parent, or a local—underscored a sense of being different.

These experiences significantly contributed to my understanding of belonging in a new cultural context. They highlighted the complexity of integrating into a community as both a visitor and a learner. The moments of inclusion deepened my appreciation for the richness of Belizean culture and the importance of openness and adaptability. The instances of feeling excluded, however minor, offered valuable insights into the challenges faced by those navigating cross-cultural environments. They reminded me of the importance of empathy and the need to actively seek common ground while honoring cultural differences.

Overall, these dynamics enriched my understanding of belonging as a fluid concept, influenced by both internal perceptions and external interactions. They reinforced the idea that true belonging requires a balance of self-awareness, respect for others, and a willingness to engage openly with the unfamiliar.



## CULTURAL AWARENESS AND RESPONSIBILITY: EXPANDING GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The Belize trip profoundly expanded my global perspective, particularly regarding environmental sustainability, social justice, and cultural preservation. Immersed in Belize's rich biodiversity and vibrant culture, I gained firsthand insights into the delicate balance between human activities and ecological preservation. The guided hikes through rainforests and explorations of the Belize Barrier Reef emphasized the urgent need for sustainable practices to protect these fragile ecosystem—from eliminating the plastics littered along the beaches brought in from the Caribbean tide to embracing the one-room homes with laundry hung out to dry to save the energy that would have been needed to power washers and dryers. What struck me in this context was how hard it is for Belizeans to receive goods from outside of the country, but how easy it is to receive all of the trash. Conversations with local guides and community members underscored the interconnection between environmental health and the well-being of local populations, highlighting the impact of climate change and deforestation on their livelihoods.

Social justice became a prominent theme during interactions with the Belizean community. Observing the efforts to preserve cultural heritage amidst modernization revealed the importance of maintaining cultural identity in the face of global pressures, fighting for their right to be seen as viable cultures in a world so full of fear of others. The resilience and pride of the Belizean people in their traditions, despite economic and environmental challenges, offered valuable lessons in cultural preservation and social equity.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

As a mature PhD student, my identity significantly shaped my contributions to discussions and activities related to global citizenship. My life experiences and academic background allowed me to approach these discussions with a depth of perspective and a focus on long-term implications. In group dialogues, I often framed global issues within broader historical, social, and environmental contexts, encouraging others to think critically about the interconnectedness of global challenges.

My participation was not just about learning but also about fostering dialogue and encouraging my younger peers to consider their roles as global citizens. I shared insights from my personal and professional experiences, as well as academic studies, linking them to the real-world issues we observed in Belize, like no heated water for showers, toilet paper needing to be placed in the trash can versus the toilet, and rationed meals, and sharing areas in the U.S. without indoor plumbing or clean water and families with significant food insecurity. This helped bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, fostering a collaborative learning environment where all voices, regardless of age, were valued.

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS: INFLUENCING ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL PURSUITS

This experience will undoubtedly influence my future academic and professional pursuits by deepening my commitment to global engagement. It reinforced the importance of integrating global perspectives into my research, particularly in areas related to environmental sustainability and social justice. I plan to incorporate more international case studies and cross-cultural

comparisons into my work, using Belize as a model for how local actions can have global implications.

Professionally, the trip has inspired me to seek opportunities that involve international collaboration and community engagement. Whether through research, teaching, or outreach, I aim to contribute to global efforts that promote sustainability, equity, and cultural preservation. The trip also reminded me of the power of experiential learning and the importance of stepping outside one's comfort zone to gain new perspectives—a lesson I will carry forward in both my academic and personal growth endeavors.

Ultimately, this experience has strengthened my resolve to be an advocate for global citizenship, fostering a sense of responsibility and action that transcends borders and unites diverse communities in the pursuit of a sustainable and just world.

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