

# Following the Red Thread of Information Overseas: Graduate Students' Information Behaviors Pertaining to Academic Travel

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## Abstract

What is the red thread of information in graduate students' academic travel? To begin answering this question, I interviewed three former M.A. students from the University of Toronto's Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (CERES), using Sonnenwald's Information Horizon Interview method. I applied Dervin's Sense-Making Theory and Bates' Berrypicking Model to analyze the findings. This research stands apart from the vast literature on graduate students' scholarly, university- and library-based, information behaviors. The findings indicate the importance of social networks as crucial strands in the red thread of information. Even the Internet is primarily used as a platform through which to access human information resources, over its use as a tool for conducting searches and retrieving online information. The findings also indicate the importance of gender, sexuality, race, and place, in students' sense of personal safety and comfort, and hence their information practices when abroad. Due to the number of cutting points in this study, and the lack of research into graduate students' non-scholarly information activities overall, further research is required.

## INTRODUCTION

What is the red thread of information in graduate students' academic travel? To begin answering this question, I conducted interviews using Sonnenwald's Information Horizon method with three informants. All three had conducted academic travel as M.A. students at the Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (CERES) at the University of Toronto. As a CERES alumnus myself, I am familiar with the program's requirements, and with my informants.

My informants spoke to me about travel they had conducted in order to satisfy program requirements. They each went to a different host city: to Berlin, Germany; St. Petersburg, Russia; and Bolzano, Italy. All relied primarily upon people/social networks as information resources, especially CERES' then-Graduate Coordinator, Edith Klein. The Internet was another source of information, but was mostly used as a resource through which to seek information from people, or to corroborate information already-acquired from people.

In addition to being a realm of graduate students' information behavior in which print and scholarly sources do not play a major, if any, role, the findings of this study stand out due to the importance of personal safety and comfort in students' information practices. Due to being located in an unfamiliar place, where the topography is unknown and the sociocultural environment is different, sometimes disturbingly so, the three interviewees' identities ended up

exerting an asymmetrical influence on their information-seeking behaviors once they were situated in their host cities. More research is needed to further develop these findings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

I reviewed some of the literature on graduate students' information behavior(s). I attempted to locate sources that dealt specifically with travel.

I began with Amy Catalano's meta-synthesis of the literature. While Catalano considered populations, such as distance and international students, that were akin to my subjects, the literature focused primarily on scholarly information (2013). Catalano committed no oversights: most sources indeed focus primarily on library-based research.

Carole George et al investigated the use of print books versus online scholarly journals, and whether students were using the academic library or the Internet to locate resources (2006).

Heidi Julien discussed millennials' preference for online sources, and their levels of Information Literacy (2009).

Xiao and Troublay also discussed the recent tendency of graduate students to rely more on Internet search engines than high-quality library sources (2008).

Russell Michalak et al examined students' Information Literacy skills, especially the potential gender disparity in students' assessments of their own IL skills (2017).

My informants rarely mentioned library research in regard to their academic travel. Only Svetlana, who travelled to take a language course, mentioned “book learning.”

Information Literacy proved relevant, as I discovered potential IL issues in Gottfried’s and Svetlana’s comments: they sometimes failed to recognize their own information needs and therefore did not bridge certain gaps before departure, or else made false assumptions.

The most relevant and useful source was Oh et al’s conference paper (2014). Although this article looked into international students settling into a host city/university for a longer duration than my informants, their needs, sources, and practices turned out to be alike.

Both groups needed to acquire information regarding what Oh et al call “basic, survival-related” and “everyday life” information. These information needs arise from these students’ migrational nature, much like immigrants.

Another valuable insight of Oh et al’s was the gendered nature of certain information-seeking strategies, specifically, walking/wandering. This became a sensitizing concept for me.

I agree with their assertion that more research needs to be done into these specific student populations and their particular information behaviors and resources.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Sonnenwald’s articles on Information Horizons provided this project’s methodology (2001 & 2005). The Information Horizon method entails a question survey, followed by a diagrammatic elicitation called an “Information Horizon map.” Before each interview I prepared a question guide. Minor modifications were made to improve the guide across the interviews, each informed by the one preceding (see Appendix 1). Before beginning each interview, a Consent Statement was read to each informant in compliance with UofT’s Office of Research Ethics. No ethical concerns were raised by any of the participants or myself during or after the interviews.

The cutting points for my research are that all of my informants are MA students, in UofT’s CERES program, between 2013 and 2016. In order to arrive at a research question for this project, it was necessary for me to work backward from the community of people that I know that presently live in the Greater Toronto Area. Most of these people are my fellow alumni from CERES. Every CERES student must complete a travel requirement, and so “academic travel” emerged as my research topic.

The three informants were, in order, Gottfried, Svetlana, and Paola. Gottfried attended CERES from 2013 to 2015. He travelled to Germany to satisfy his program travel

requirement in the Summer of 2015. He interned at the Berlin Social Science Research Centre (VZB).

Svetlana attended CERES from 2014 to 2016. She travelled to Russia to satisfy her language requirement in the Summer of 2015. She studied at St. Petersburg State University’s Smolny Institute, through a program hosted by Dalhousie University in Halifax.

Paola attended CERES from 2014 to 2016. She travelled to Italy to satisfy her travel requirement in the Summer of 2015. She interned at the Institute for Minority Rights at the European Academy of Bozen/Bolzano.

A sensitizing concept that arose across the interviews was the issue of personal safety and comfort overseas.

## FINDINGS

### Gottfried

Gottfried’s primary information source about the requirement and its fulfillment was student advisor Edith Klein. In addition to email, their primary means of communication was face-to-face conversation in her office. Gottfried also spoke with fellow students, and wrote to students with past experience at the institutions he was considering. Lastly, he consulted the VZB’s website and corresponded with the professor he was Research Assistant to there. Gottfried felt the best information he could have received would have been from someone with past experience in the VZB internship.

He characterized his preparation for the trip as deliberately “haphazard,” based on his past experience working in Europe, rather than due to a lack of information. He made two false assumptions: that the dress code would be business casual, and that he would be able to get by easily in English. He therefore packed too many collared shirts, and did not prepare German phrases.

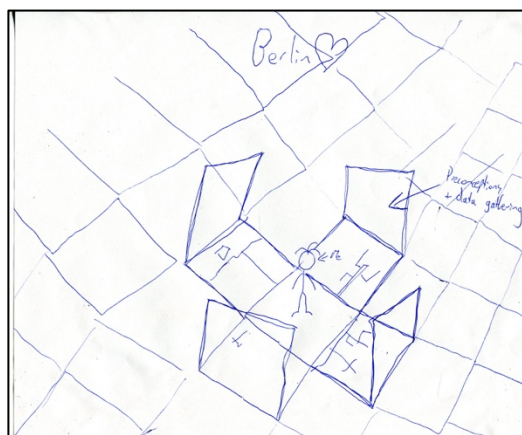


Figure 1. Gottfried encountered unexpected information serendipitously in Berlin (Erdelez 1999).

In Berlin, Gottfried relied upon friends and co-workers as information sources. Although he did consult Internet sources, he commented that he used these “primarily to check out recommendations I received,” and so “it was more of a vetting process than an exploratory process.”

Information that Gottfried required concerned accommodation, transportation, and things to do in Berlin.

**Svetlana**

Svetlana discovered the Smolny language program through Edith Klein, whom she consulted regarding various language programs. Klein referred Svetlana to someone who had previously completed the program; from there, she corresponded with Dalhousie administrators for information.

Svetlana noted that a lot of information and resources regarding the trip itself, as well as life in St. Petersburg, was provided directly by Dalhousie; there were, however, some information gaps: Svetlana was “pretty sure,” but not certain, that someone was going to pick her up at the airport in St. Petersburg, for example. Other information was provided, but not in as timely a manner as Svetlana would have preferred:

They told us who we were going to be staying with before we went – a couple days only, actually, which was quite annoying because I was like, ‘Hey, I wonder where I’m going to be living in St. Petersburg, [so I can] look up maps and stuff.’

Upon arrival, Svetlana’s major sources of information were her billet mother, an information package provided by Dalhousie, her teachers, local friends, classmates, Google, and ex-pat blogs from the early 2000s.

Information that Svetlana required concerned cellphone cards, transportation, leisure and tourist activities, where to take out money without being scammed, and which restaurants served vegetables.

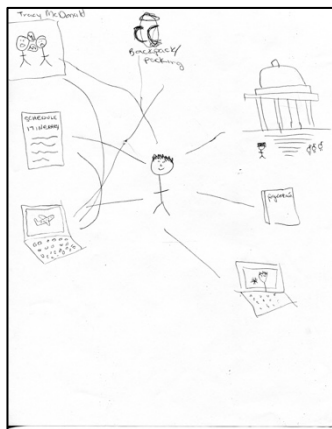


Figure 2. Svetlana’s map depicts her undergraduate thesis supervisor – a crucial source not mentioned in the survey. Agreement between maps and surveys is discussed in Sonnenwald (2001).

**Paola**

Paola stated that not much information was provided about students’ options for satisfying their travel requirements. Most of it came from “word of mouth” (although she also mentioned a “general list”), and concerned internships students had completed in the past, as opposed to guaranteed placements. Her primary sources were students/alumni who had already completed their requirement. Paola learned about her internship through Edith Klein. Klein was familiar with Paola’s research, and so was able to recommend Bolzano, which Paola remarked “was totally up my alley.”

Paola required visa information from the Italian consulate, and information about accommodations. Both information-seeking processes were described as “nightmarish.” Her first resource for the latter was a CERES/Bolzano alumnus, who recommended websites that Paola rejected as “sketchy.” She instead used a website, Couchsurfing, that she had personal experience with. Through Couchsurfing she was referred to a local student forum, where housing listings were posted.

In Bolzano, her primary sources of information were her roommate, other local friends Paola met online, co-workers, and websites – but the latter “only after I was told by other people to go there.”

Information Paola required concerned leisure activities, medical clinics, post offices, “banks with ATMs that don’t charge you obscene amounts of money,” transportation, and navigation.

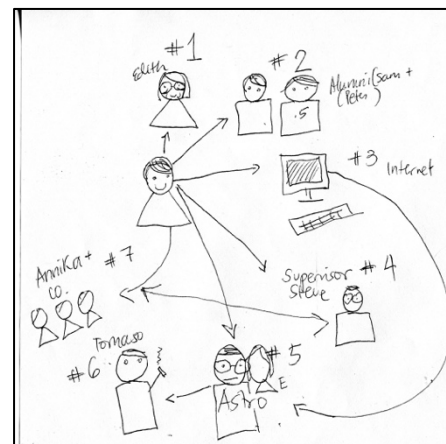


Figure 3. Paola also identified more of her social network in her map than in the survey.

**DISCUSSION**

I approached this project with Dervin’s Sense-Making Metaphor in the forefront of my mind. I conceived of my informants as travelling through space and time, encountering situations in which they faced information gaps that they needed to bridge, and ultimately accomplishing their goals through the successful retrieval of information.

However, when I analyzed my findings I realized that in fact my informants conformed better with Bates’ Berrypicking

model. Once their search was instigated by the imposition of CERES requirements, each informant had multiple queries that evolved over time, and required different search strategies and information sources to resolve (1989). The students' information seeking continued in this manner through the completion of their trips.

However, in the Toronto stage of my informants' querying process, while they did venture out and seek information using a range of strategies and sources, nevertheless they continually returned to Edith Klein with their gathered information and further queries. I propose that in this CERES-specific context, the Berrypicking model at this stage could be modified into a "Spiderweb model," with Klein at the center of the web of red thread. Once the informants departed, and the tether to Klein was cut, they embarked on a truer "Berrypicking" course.

Klein's prominence brings me to the importance of social networks as information resources. My informants sought information from fellow students, colleagues, friends, roommates, and even strangers. Even Internet websites were mainly relied on as another platform through which to connect and communicate directly with human information sources. Their secondary use was to corroborate information supplied by people, or to access sites recommended by people. Its final, least important uses were to seek ("Google") information not previously supplied conversationally, or to book transportation/accommodation.

Sonnenwald (2005) discusses the importance of social networks and contexts on information behavior. Indeed, this is the very foundation upon which the idea of the information horizon rises: that these constrain and enable information behavior. My informants' information needs and resources were inextricable from the CERES context, situation, and social network. Further research is necessary to explore graduate students' academic travel in other horizons.

Oh et al raised the gendered nature of a specific information-seeking strategy, walking/wandering, utilized by "migrational" students. Gottfried is a straight, white man; Svetlana a self-identified "queer" woman; and Paola is Filipina. These identities were informationally relevant, particularly in how they intersected with my informants' host cities. Gottfried was cavalierly able to aimlessly wander as an information-seeking strategy. Svetlana wandered, but occasionally felt endangered by a threat of violence, which in hindsight (perhaps impacted by later academic research) troubles her more greatly. Paola felt uncomfortable, as she was often stared at. Their information practices were thus asymmetrically impacted in ways they would not be in another context, such as library-based research at their home university. More research needs to be done to further explore these findings.

I will somewhat trouble the gendered and racialized aspects of this analysis, however, by noting that Gottfried did not

travel outside Berlin during his trip because he was "put off by traveling for a few days, alone, in a place where I didn't really know anyone." That is, he was uncomfortable being cut off from his most valued information supply: his social network.

## **METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS**

This was my first experience not only using the Information Horizon method, but conducting semi-structured interviews at all. My greatest methodological problem turned out to be my own skill and dynamism. I proved inexperienced at probing my informants for more in-depth responses, and sometimes failed to notice areas of interest and contradiction that I should have inquired about, until I was at the transcription/analysis stage. Methodological problems I encountered may have arisen more from this factor than from inherent flaws in IHI.

My informants were often insecure and anxious about the map, often requesting what I considered excessive instruction, and eager to put their pens down prematurely. They often did not seem to connect the survey questions with the map, although the survey should prime informants for the maps. Perhaps if they were to draw the maps and respond to the survey questions simultaneously, this cognitive gap could be bridged, and the agreement between surveys and maps could be enhanced – although whether that would be detrimental to the intention of discovering areas of information neglected/unconsidered by researchers, I am not certain (Sonnenwald 2001).

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper investigated the question "What is the red thread of information in graduate students' academic travel?" This research stands out from the vast literature on graduate students' scholarly, university- and library-based, information needs, sources, and practices.

The findings indicate the importance of social networks and people as crucial sources of information. The Internet is primarily used as another platform for accessing human information resources, above its use as a tool for conducting searches and retrieving online information. The findings also indicate the importance of gender, sexuality, race, place, safety, and comfort in students' information practices abroad.

The students' information behaviors accorded with Bates' Berrypicking model; however, if one were to "zoom in" to particular situational sub-queries along the route, one may see a Dervin Sense-Making figure jogging along the path, building bridges over gaps encountered between themselves and the "berries" of retrieved information.

There were a number of cutting points in this study, and more research is necessary to synthesize CERES students' informational behaviors, with those of graduate students in other programs, faculties, and universities.

However, for now we may hypothesize that, at least in this context, despite popular belief, millennials are not heavily dependent upon the Internet and digital technology, so much as they rely upon each other.

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## AUTHOR'S BIO

Julia Warren is an M.I. Student in the Library and Information Sciences concentration at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information (iSchool). She is also in the Book History Print Culture collaborative program. She previously earned an M.A from the Center for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at UofT, for which she travelled to Berlin's Leo Baeck Summer University in Jewish Studies in 2015.

## APPENDIX 1

### Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your graduate degree
2. When were you at CERES?
3. What were your majors and minors?
4. And you travelled for academic purposes during this degree? Why?
5. Had you conducted academic travel prior to this degree?
6. While at CERES what kind of academic trips did you go on?
7. Tell me about one specific example of an academic trip you went on:
8. When was the trip?
9. How did you learn about this trip?
10. Were there other trip opportunities to choose from?
11. Where did you go if you had questions about the various opportunities?
12. How did you choose this particular opportunity?
13. Who did you go to for help, or what resources did you use, to find the information you needed before you departed?
14. What information, or type of information, did you need? Why?
15. Once you were travelling abroad, what information did you need?
16. Where did you go for help, or what resources did you use?
17. Are you satisfied with how things worked out? Is there anything you would have liked to have done differently in hindsight?
18. Have you conducted academic or professional, work-related travel subsequent to these experiences?
19. Were your experiences with academic travel helpful to you in planning or preparing for these subsequent trips?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to share or bring up?

## APPENDIX 2

Transcription of 1-2 of my favourite quotes from each interview, including the question or probes used to prompt them.

### Gottfried:

Q: How did you learn your way around?

A: I bought a Moleskine notebook that was specific to Berlin and included a map of the whole city. I basically just used that. I also aimlessly wandered a lot, got lost a lot. I was guided by friends occasionally.

Q: Did you use Google Maps?

A: No, I didn't have 3G.

Drawing his information horizon:

Gottfried: It kind of felt like, often when I travel and I go somewhere, it's like I have a little piece based on whatever information that you've collected that you're already kind of familiar with. Say this is already some kind of map, there are things inside this, you already know where they are: you know where you're going to be working, and you have to take [public transit] to get to work, and this is the river, and you work right there. And I'm not going to draw the whole thing, but this is a map, and this is what you know about because you've looked it up, or you've heard about it, and this is what you think – what I thought Berlin was like. And you can expand this, it's not just a map of the city, it's what you *think* you know about the place that you're going. And then over here is the rest of it: kind of like you bring that with you, and you get there, and it kind of falls into place, and you're like, "Oh! Look at all the rest of this stuff!" And the rest of this is... So it's kind of like you carry around your little box that you've prepared before you went on the trip, and you get there, and you sort of, like, clunk it down where you think it's supposed to go, and then you fold it out and see if it fits, and some parts don't fit, and you fold this down and it's like, "Okay, it's not quite what I thought," and then it ends up moulding to what you end up yourself discovering – the knowledge you acquire about the little part of the place that you go.

### Svetlana:

Q: So, a lot of things had already been provided that you didn't need to investigate?

A: Yeah, they picked us up from the airport, which was great, 'cause honestly I feel like it would have been a lot more challenging. And then I came home and, like, my billet mother was like, 'here, have some food, here's your Wi-Fi password, you can call your mom!' And the next day she took me to get a cellphone card and stuff. And then I went off on my own, and she was like, 'It's a really long walk, why are you going on your own like this?' But it was fun, and by 'fun' I mean 'horrifying'!

Q: Why do you mean horrifying?

A: I think retrospectively horrifying to be like, 'yes, you know what a great idea is? To let this young woman who doesn't speak any Russian to wander alone in St. Petersburg!'

Q: So, at the time you felt safe, but in retrospect you feel that was unwise?

A: I don't know, maybe I'm overthinking the danger, but it was kind of weird. If you were in a country where you knew that they, like, beat the shit out of queer people sometimes, and you know that you're walking around as a queer person, and you know that they disrespect women, and you're like, 'You know what? I'll just walk around by myself! That's fine! You know? I feel like, it's actually fine, and I feel like I should have felt more scared or something, but I don't – and now I just carry around this idea that it was scary? Which it was, sometimes, but other times it was fine.

Q: You were scared because other people were posing threats?

A: Yeah, like when a group of three men dressed in paramilitary gear walked out of a store with rifles, when you're going to lunch after your language classes, you feel uncomfortable.

Paola:

Q: So, you had to do an academic trip of some kind, but you had various options? How did you learn about all the options?

A: To be honest, there wasn't that much information provided. A lot of the information we got came from the admin of the department, but it wasn't – there weren't really, like, finalized options. They were just sort of like, 'these are the types of internships that past students have done,' as opposed to them being, like, solid agreements that were made between our department and the other respective institutions. So, in terms of information, there was very little of it, it was a lot of word of mouth. And yeah, it was also a matter of me asking past alumni, past students, about where they went and what their experiences were, and that I guess made up the majority, or the great brunt, of how I was able to access that information.

Q: And you felt safe wandering around?

A: I felt safe, but I was also, like, the only Filipino that these people had ever seen, maybe. But it was also the time when the migration crisis was at its peak in Europe, so there were a lot of people of color, a lot of African, and North African, and Middle Eastern refugees who had been, like, stranded at the train station, because it was the last stop before Austria. But other than those people, and the actual white natives, I was like 'the rando,' like, where did I come from?

Q: But that didn't make you feel unsafe, just awkward?

A: Yeah. For sure uncomfortable in the first week I would say, because people would occasionally stare. But otherwise it was fine. There was, like, a Thai person. She was okay. So, it wasn't so bad.

### **APPENDIX 3**

Enlarged copies of the visual data, beginning on the next page.



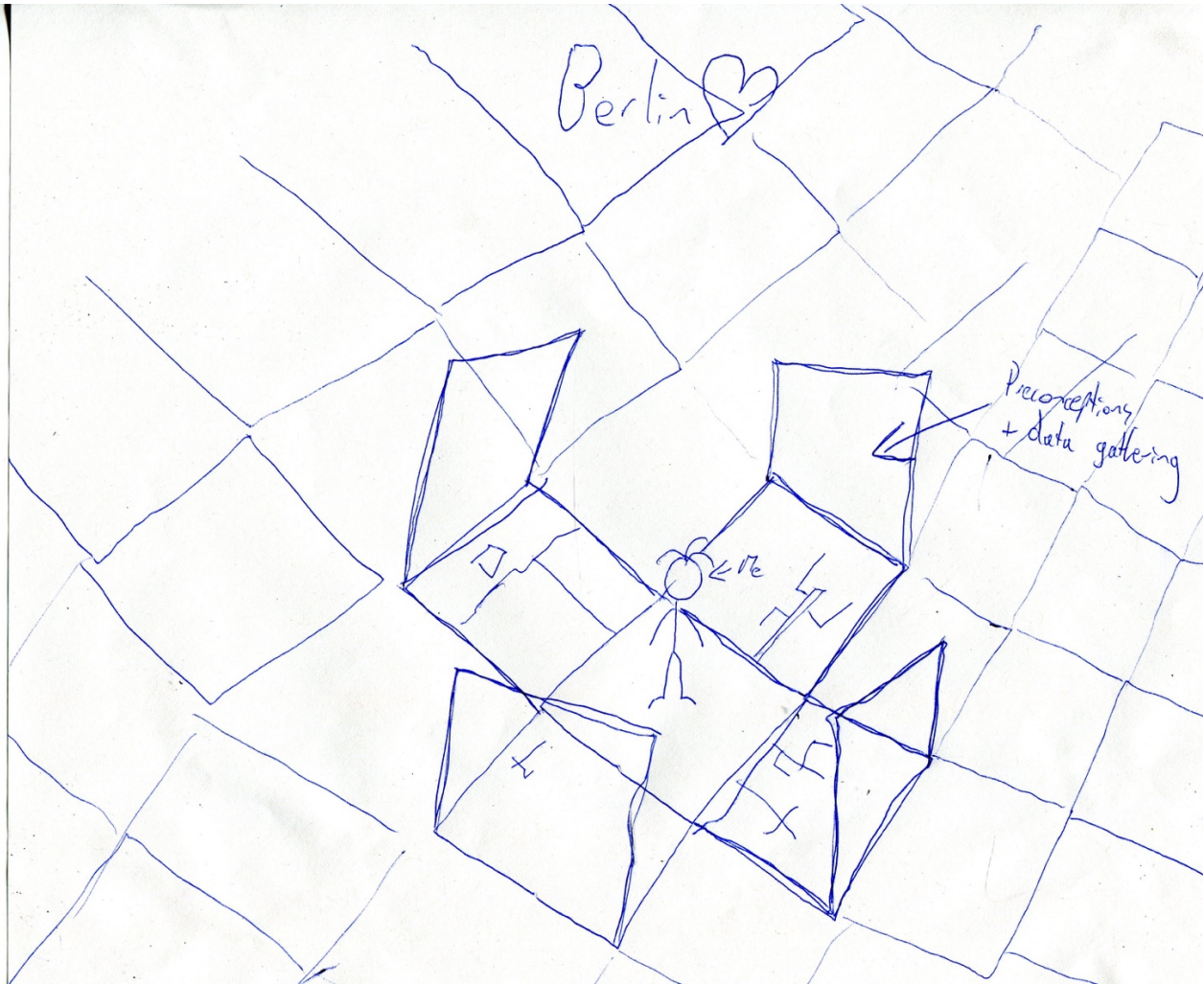


Figure 1 enlarged: Gottfried

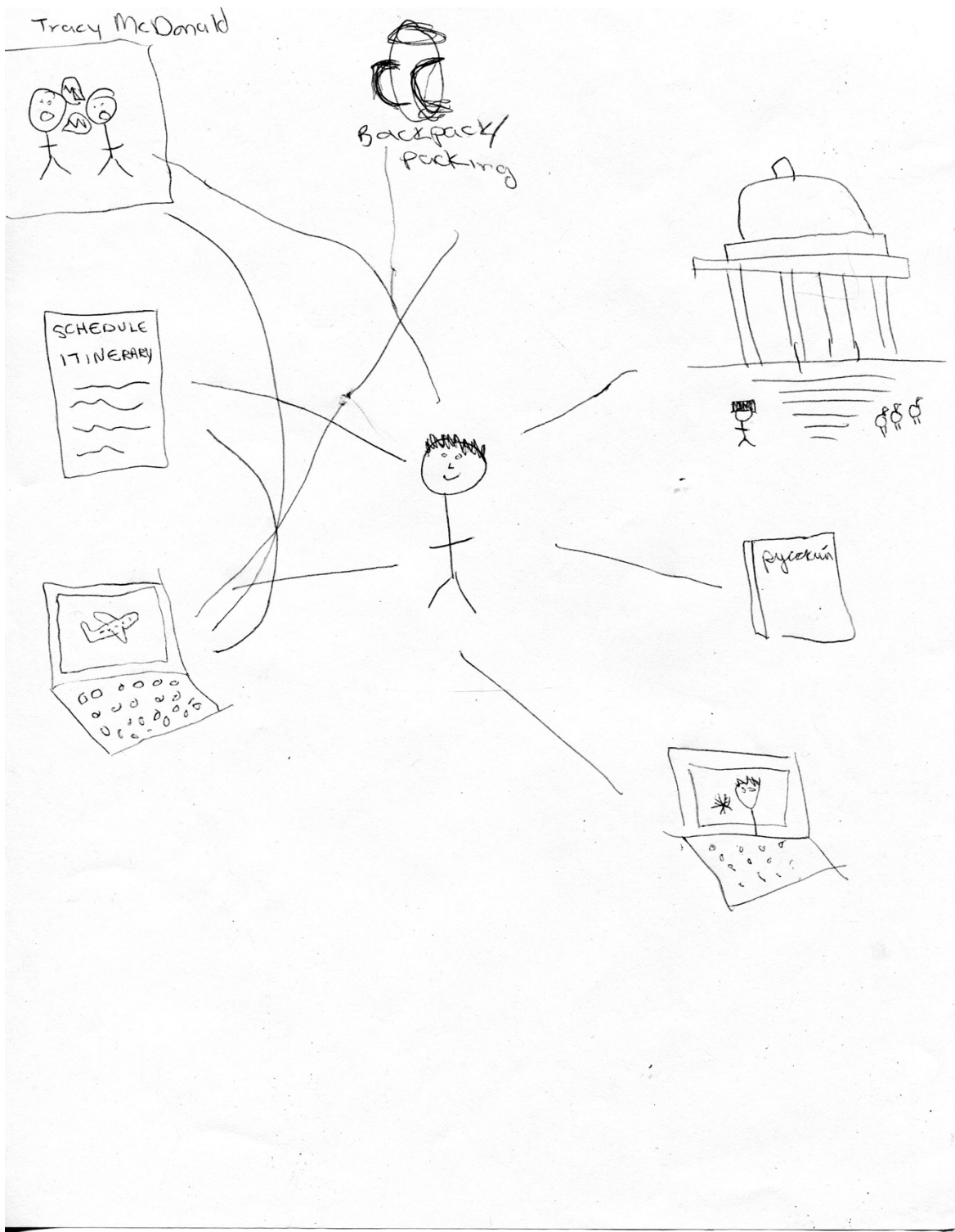


Figure 2 enlarged: Svetlana

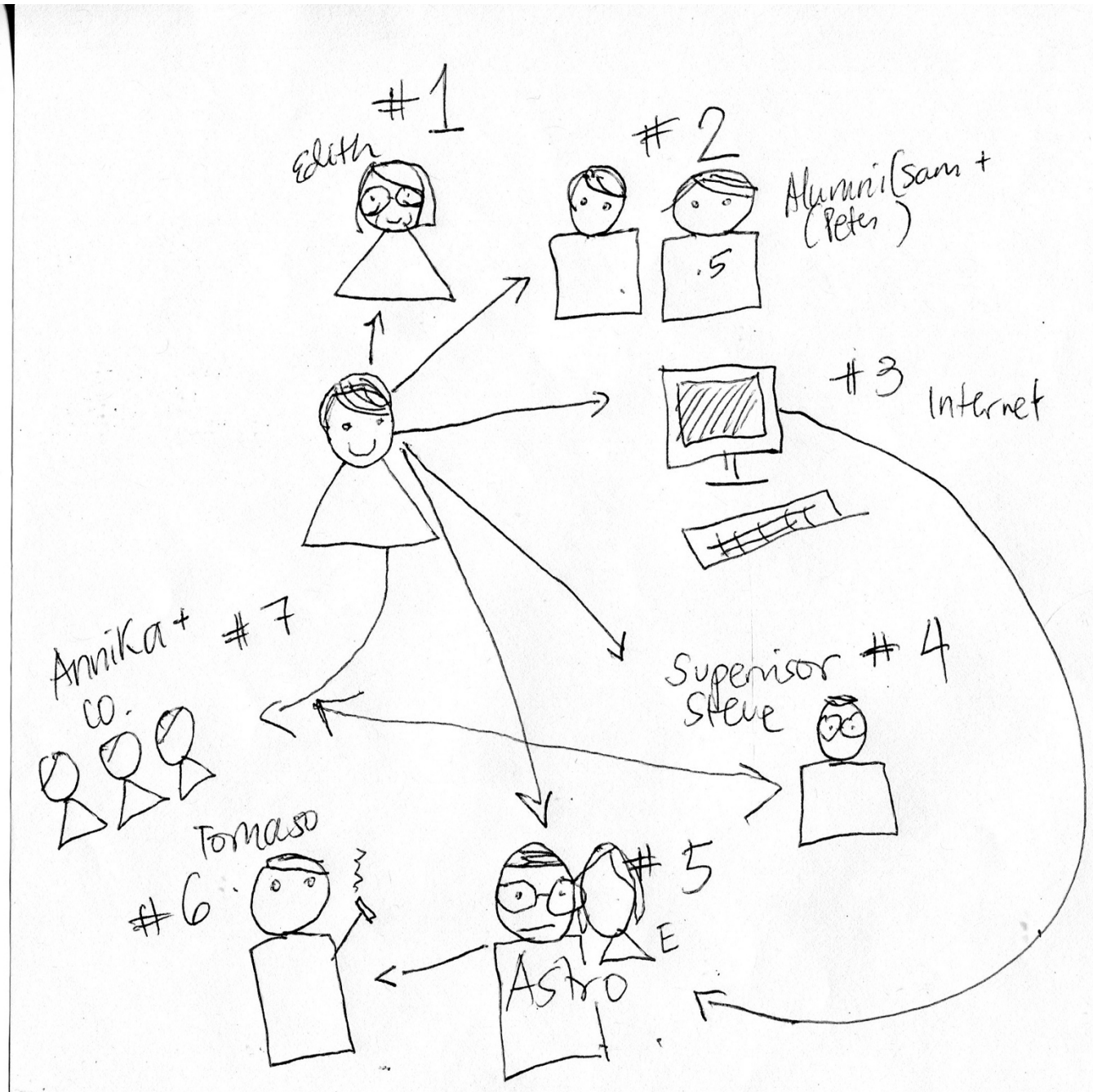


Figure 3 enlarged: Paola