

Study Abroad: Striving for Transformative Impact

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ABSTRACT

Students who participate in a study abroad experience report it as a life-changing event or an experience that will have long-term effects on both students and faculty. But what exactly does that mean? Is this simply a natural result of such a trip or is more involved? By looking at the research and informal evaluations of the participants, it would seem a successful and transformative study abroad experience is more by design than default. This article will review the key components which are apparent for a successful and transformative experience. Additionally it will also provide faculty who are contemplating such a venture some valuable guidelines and perhaps help those faculty who have led previous study abroad groups to improve and enhance their next venture abroad.

Introduction

Research provides compelling support for the importance and efficacy of study abroad programs. Strange and Gibson (2017) indicated the theoretical basis for study abroad experiences lies within two major learning theories: Transformative Learning Theory and Experiential Learning Theory. Transformative Learning Theory was first developed by Jack Mezirow in the 1990s. This theory postulates that adult learners are challenged best to change their life perspectives and overcome biases “through reflection, active learning, and placing ourselves in uncomfortable situations” (Strange & Gibson, 2017, p. 86). Obviously, study abroad experiences take students out of their comfort zones and expose them to situations and cultural engagements, which are beyond their typical life experiences. The second theory Strange and Gibson (2017) referred to was Experiential Learning Experience. Experiential Learning Experience theory is based on the student learning through an engaged experience and then reflecting upon that experience to glean what has been learned. Strange and Gibson (2017) suggest this theory is actually essential in helping learners “develop the type of action oriented experience that is likely to induce transformation” (p. 88). Wood and St. Peters (2014) also found the study abroad experience rooted in Experiential Learning Theory but focused on the impact of such an experience on cultural intelligence (CQ) and concluded “short-term cross-cultural study tours enhance metacognitive, cognitive and motivational CQ” (p. 567). Dwyer and Peters (2004) established the efficacy of study abroad trips as providing students with personal growth, intercultural development, education, and career attainment. Their study effectively substantiated the importance of a study abroad experience on the overall learning process and encouraged students to research potential learning institutions’ study abroad offers as they consider enrollment. Perry, Stoner, and Tarrant (2012) also believed short-term study abroad programs

legitimized the educative value of such an experience as “a source of transformative learning through concrete, real-world experiences and critical reflection” (p. 679).

Essential Elements

Proper design

Faculty and administration must take great care to ensure the study abroad trip is strategically designed for maximum impact as a transformational experience. Working in close collaboration with the college or university’s international studies office, faculty will be confident the program is designed to meet their students’ academic needs. Travel to an international location doesn’t always ensure students will glean the most from the trip in relation to academic and cultural awareness. Study abroad programs can be of any length from one week to a full year. It is up to the faculty member and appropriate travel administrators to determine what would be best for that particular course. Depending on the chosen destination, faculty must decide if the trip is feasible, both in terms of cost and purpose. Kamdar and Lewis (2015) maintain trip planning and preparation should be “designed to encourage students to engage in deeper academic learning in conjunction with short-term study-abroad experiences” (p. 1). Without such intentional planning and organization, study abroad trips will lack the academic and cultural impact so desired by faculty for their students. Strange and Gibson (2017) indicate the importance of planning each trip with that particular course, group of students, and learning objectives in mind. When properly designed, even short-term study abroad ventures have tremendous capacity to achieve life-changing experiences for students. Perry et al. (2012) concluded: “when coupled with an adequate pedagogical framework, short-term study abroad could serve as an educative opportunity for fostering transformative learning environments where new experiences and perspective may be developed” (p. 682).

Connection to existing courses

Study abroad groups that are course-specific result in maximum academic effect. Wood and St. Peters (2014) emphasize the importance of considering the study abroad journey as a learning trip, a concept far beyond what might constitute business travel, a vacation, or pleasure trip. Connecting the trip to the course content assures a learning experience is more apt to happen. Kamdar and Lewis (2015) also underscored the importance of following up the trip with adequate assessment. Determining what was learned and to what extent it was learned provide the data essential for future planning and refinement for more efficacious study abroad experiences. Faculty should carefully consider the student learning objectives within the course syllabus. Such connection to the existing course objectives lead to more success academic results. Dwyer and Peters (2004) discovered in their study that students reported their subsequent educational experiences were positively influenced, skill sets were acquired that influenced their career path, and career directions were often clarified through the study abroad experience. When study abroad courses are attached to service-learning (community-based) activities, the richness of the experiences is exponentially increased. Students who are given an opportunity to engage with professionals, clients, or peers in the context of hands-on experiences report higher levels of course comprehension (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2003). Ibrahim (2010) concluded students engaged in service-learning through their coursework were “aware not only of the academic benefits of such opportunities, but also of the inter-personal, intra-personal, and societal benefits” (p. 395).

Specific cultural engagement activities

An effective study abroad experience provides a rich cultural experience regardless of the length of stay. Research has shown students can be culturally enriched even on short-term trips.

Strange and Gibson (2017) reviewed a number of studies and concluded that by leveraging academic content with the geographic specifics, transformational learning is often the natural result. Dwyer and Peters (2004) insisted their research substantiated the belief that study abroad experiences “train future global leaders to be more effective, respectful of other cultures and political and economic systems, and willing to take a stand for the world’s welfare” (p. 1). This is particularly important even for corporations who are looking for employees with global diversity and cultural expertise. Wood and St. Peters (2014) declared study abroad experiences tend to develop global leadership skills, provide experiential intelligence, and enhance holistic learning. As globalization and world challenges continue to arise in areas such as politics, geography, health, mental health, and economics, the worldwide stage is set for those leaders who have international experience.

Screening participants

Study abroad trips offer both physical and mental challenges as well as opportunities to students. As such, these challenges can impact the overall effectiveness of a study abroad trip if students are not properly screened for. Study abroad trips are meant to be a transformative or a life-changing experience, but a student’s study abroad intentions can determine whether the trip is successful in producing these outcomes. Faculty leaders need to be prepared to handle every situation that could occur. Sometimes students view a study abroad trip as a glorified vacation and lose sight of the original academic purpose of the trip. Students who have expectations to improve their understanding of other countries and cultures are more likely to attend a study abroad trip (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015). Koernig (2007) discusses the principle of homophily where “individuals bond with and trust similar individuals” (p. 212). Individuals are more likely to trust another individual who shares commonalities with them. This principle could help a

faculty member screen for an individual who might have the wrong intentions for participating in a study abroad. The quicker students with poor intentions are identified the easier it will be to plan accordingly. Faculty who get to know their students and build homophily before departure also get the opportunity to prepare students for mental and physical challenges. Participating in a study abroad requires students to mentally challenge their cultural and social norms. Every culture has their own way of communicating and naming things. Slang reflects ethnic and cultural background, but it also helps to build a current societal norm (Guseva, 2014). It is important that students understand what words are acceptable and which are not in a foreign country. Words that are semantically innocent in a student's home culture, could be vulgar or offensive in another culture. Faculty should also provide students with the destination country's cultural background to help ease any culture shock that might occur. Physically, students need to be prepared for any and all travel plans. Traveling by air, train, car, bike, or foot can be tiresome or strenuous for students. For example, walking tours are an effective way to help students acclimate to a new environment (Koernig, 2007). Walking tours could be longer than students might anticipate and if students aren't prepared to do a lot of walking, they could become easily fatigued. Letting students know travel plans before departure can help them prep for any necessary physical exertion during their trip.

Conclusion

When faculty and university administrators properly design the study abroad trip, connect it to course-specific learning outcomes, emphasize and carefully craft cultural engagement activities, and screen for those students who will glean the most from these travel-abroad experiences, a transformational study abroad experience can be expected. Enhancing and improving study abroad trips is best achieved through a comprehensive evaluation following

each study abroad trip. Such an instrument will collect data regarding demographic information of students, their evaluation of the trip preparation, their overall satisfaction of the trip and its faculty leaders, their overall review of the sites and activities involved in the trip, whether or not the study abroad trip was worth the money invested, and what specific skills or knowledge they may have acquired as a result of participating in the study abroad trip. The study abroad experience can serve as a novel approach to transformational learning of students as well as an opportunity for them to develop global skill sets.

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