US-China Foreign Language, June 2024, Vol. 22, No. 6, 283-297
doi:10.17265/1539-8080/2024.06.001

DAVID PUBLISHING

Maximizing Short-Term Study Abroad: A Practical Guide to Program Design

Rachel Krantz
Shepherd University, Shepherdstown, USA

Study abroad can be a life-changing experience, enabling greater autonomy, self-confidence, and self-awareness while strengthening linguistic and cultural skills. Yet, many students are daunted by traditional semester- or year-long programs. In such cases, short-term study abroad is a suitable alternative as it provides international experience with less investment of time and money. In addition, brief sojourns are less intimidating for participants who have never left their country. However, since students are abroad for only a few weeks, it is essential to maximize the impact of the program in terms of personal transformation and development of intercultural competence. Program designers must keep students in the "growth zone" by creating supportive structures that reduce the dissonance caused by unfamiliar surroundings. Specifically, a strong study abroad program should include a cross-cultural orientation before departure, mentoring and reflective journaling while in country, and a guided debriefing after return. In addition, appropriate assessment tools should be selected to measure both student progress and program effectiveness.

Keywords: short-term study abroad, program design, assessment, transformational learning, intercultural competence, critical thinking, self-reflection

Introduction

If you have studied abroad, I am sure you remember your first experience well. I certainly do. Going to France when I was 16 left an indelible mark. It was literally life-changing, confirming my desire to become a language teacher. Being in Paris (instead of just reading about it) was at turns exhilarating and terrifying. I quickly discovered that my French was not as good as I had thought but also realized that I could overcome obstacles and embrace the unfamiliar. Consequently, it was a period of great growth.

As this anecdote illustrates, cross-cultural experiences can be transformative. You may therefore be surprised to learn that less than 2% of students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the US studied abroad during the 2015/2016 academic year (Seifen, Rodriguez, & Johnson, 2017, p. 18). What accounts for this surprisingly low number? Cost is no doubt a significant factor: Many students cannot afford the program fees. Then, there is the question of time: Spending a semester or year abroad can seem impractical when students are trying to graduate on schedule while juggling a job and social responsibilities. And, finally, there is the fear factor. For someone who has never traveled outside his/her state or region, living in another culture can be daunting. They wonder how they will manage: What if I cannot communicate? What if I get lost? What if I hate the food?

Rachel Krantz, Dr., associate professor, Department of English and Modern Languages, Shepherd University, Shepherdstown, USA.

This is where shorter programs (typically eight weeks or less) come into the picture. These brief sojourns address all issues raised above and are a great way to "hook" participants on study abroad. First, short trips are less intimidating than semester- or year-long programs. Students can dip their toes into international waters without the risk of being submerged by difference. In addition, shorter programs are less expensive and more flexible. A student who cannot afford to go abroad for a semester or a year can usually find funds for a three- or four-week trip. And, as these compact experiences typically take place during summer break, students can fit them into their schedules without interrupting progress towards graduation.

Myriad short-term study abroad programs are available through professional organizations such as the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) and the International Institute for the Education of Students (IES). However, if you want to ensure the quality of your program and personally support your students' learning, then creating a faculty-led trip is the best option. I can say this from experience, since I have taken students abroad 11 times to destinations including France, Quebec, Peru, and Costa Rica, and each trip has been more rewarding than the last. However, the first time I designed a program, I felt completely out of my element. I wished there were a simple, practical guide that would walk me through the process, step by step. Of course, numerous articles on the subject are available, so I did research and was able to piece together a solid program. But here, I will share my knowledge with you, so that you feel empowered either to design your first study abroad program or improve an existing one.

The goal of this article is to answer the following questions regarding study abroad outcomes. What kind of program has the most positive impact on participants? What role do participants play in their growth and learning while abroad? How can we assess the effectiveness of a study abroad program? Before answering these questions, we will examine a theoretical framework that explains the relationship between exposure to cultural difference and personal transformation. We will then look at three examples of study abroad to see what works well and what does not. By learning from the mistakes of others, we will be better able to create a program that provides students with the tools they need to thrive abroad. Next, we talk in detail about the building blocks of a strong program, namely clear goals, a cross-cultural orientation before departure, practical and emotional support in-country, and structured opportunities for reflection and sharing after re-entry. Finally, we will consider how to best assess both participants' progress and the effectiveness of our program.

Study Abroad as Personal Transformation

If you are enthralled by language and culture, you might assume that once in country, participants take advantage of every opportunity to explore the local culture and speak the target language. However, as Vande Berg notes, many who go abroad experience little to no change in terms of their cultural or linguistic skills because they spend their time "[a]voiding meaningful contact with locals, traveling … in groups of other withdrawn and culturally marginalized U.S. students, using English whenever possible" (2007, p. 394). Simply put, when given a choice, participants typically choose the path of least resistance. Chwialkowska observed this tendency after surveying more than 700 students who spent six months to a year studying abroad. Her data revealed that most participants signed up for the same courses as peers from their home institution and sat with them during class time. Only 10% of participants worked on group projects with other international students, with the rest preferring to collaborate with students who spoke their native language. Similarly, nearly half of the participants chose to share accommodations with colleagues of the same cultural background, with more than 20% selecting a roommate from their home institution (2020, p. 546).

This type of avoidant behavior can seem paradoxical until you realize it is a natural response to the dissonance caused by physical, cultural, social, and emotional challenges. Thus, these participants are not refusing to learn, but rather (unconsciously) protecting themselves and their sense of identity. Unfortunately, the very discomfort they seek to avoid is what drives learning and personal growth. This idea was first proposed by Piaget in the 1970s, and then expanded by Mezirow in the early 1990s. According to Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory, new learning experiences are necessary for perspective transformation to occur. The transformation process begins with a disorienting dilemma, which leads to self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, and an exploration of new actions and roles. If successful, the process results in the integration of new beliefs into one's existing world perspective.

This type of transformation is what our students need to become global citizens. However, as Chwialkowska's data reveal, many participants are not able to cope with the "disorienting dilemmas" encountered abroad. Therefore, they try to minimize the amount of dissonance they encounter. This pattern is exactly what Prouty, Panicucci, and Collinson (2007) described in their "comfort zone" model of learning, which builds on Mezirow's theory. When students are in their comfort zone, they feel safe and can function well. However, little or no change occurs in their thinking. For learning to take place, they must be (gently) pushed into the growth zone, where there is a moderate amount of discomfort. Yet, we must be careful not to push students too far, or they will end up in the panic zone. Here, the levels of discomfort and dissonance are so overwhelming that students shut down and no learning occurs.

The line between growth and panic is a fine one, especially since students' response to discomfort can vary widely. How they react to a challenge depends on their capacity to adjust which, in turn, depends on factors such willingness to take risk, flexibility, as well as their current levels of language proficiency and intercultural competence. This means that what is stressful for one person will be easily manageable for another. For example, when taking a train alone from one city to another, John may be in his comfort zone, whereas this task may push Sally into her growth zone. For Robert, however, the difficulties involved may provoke deep anxiety, and he may not be able to function at all.

Given the variability in student response to stressors, what can program leaders do to keep everyone in the growth zone as much as possible? First, one must identify the main causes of dissonance, and then work to offset them with supportive structures that increase participants' comfort levels. Let us start with the most general sources of dissonance. As Santoro and Major (2012) emphasized, living abroad is inherently stressful and often results in physical challenges (e.g., using squat toilets in India) as well as communication challenges (e.g., not knowing how to voice a complaint appropriately in Korea). Being in a foreign country can also result in challenges to identity, since participants are no longer part of the dominant cultural majority. As the "exotic other", they may attract unwanted attention (stares, requests for photos) or be held personally responsible for the habits and values of their home country.

In addition to these general factors, certain program components also cause substantial dissonance, namely living with a host family, taking classes at a foreign institution, and interacting with the local community in a language not your own. This is where a well-designed program comes in, since a cross-cultural orientation before departure, mentoring, and reflective journaling while in country, and guided debriefing and self-reflection after return can provide participants with the support they need to move out of their comfort zone, engage culturally, and experience study abroad as personal transformation.

Learning From Our Mistakes: What Not to Do

Before we look at each of these components in more detail, let us spend a few minutes looking at mistakes made in the past with regard to program design. My intent here is not to criticize, but rather to point out how rapidly study abroad has evolved in the past few decades, shifting from the Grand Tour inspired Junior Year Abroad to today's student-centered learning paradigm. I also want us to learn from the errors of others, so that we do not make the same mistakes when designing/revamping our own programs.

Traditional Study Abroad: Sink or Swim

Let us begin with the traditional study abroad format prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s. Like combat troops being airdropped into battle zones, participants were parachute-dropped into the target country armed only with a suitcase and a bilingual dictionary. It was sink or swim. Moreover, unfortunately, the majority sank. Why? It is because these programs had only vague, undefined goals and offered almost no support either before, during, or after the experience. The premise was that through spending time in a different country, "Students would make some progress in another language and … would in some mysterious way learn through exposure to, through contact with, another culture" (Vande Berg, 2007, p. 393). The program organizers falsely assumed that students who had performed well on their home campus would do the same when left to their own devices at the foreign university.

In making these assumptions, program leaders failed to take into the account the differences in educational practices between the home and target countries. For example, when I arrived in Strasbourg for my junior year abroad, I was totally unprepared for the French way of teaching. Both at the local language school and the Université de Strasbourg, the teacher was a godlike expert, doling out knowledge to be memorized rather than questioned. There was no give and take, no collaboration between instructor and student as is typically the case in American colleges. However, I was also stymied by unfamiliar didactic techniques, such as the *explication de texte* and the *dissertation à plan didactique*.

Similarly, program organizers failed to provide participants with the tools needed to thrive in an unfamiliar environment. There was a pre-departure orientation, but it focused only on "nuts and bolts" such as passports, travel arrangements, weather, and packing. No mention was made of culture shock or how to deal with the discomfort we might experience. Nor did we talk about intercultural competence and strategies for decoding and responding to authentic input. Once, on the ground, we basically learned through trial and error, through *faux pas* that, if we were lucky, were explained by our host family or local peers. We were often homesick, stressed, and disoriented. In addition, once we returned home, the program was over. Each participant was left to make sense of the experience on their own, as best they could.

International Practicum 2013: Ineffective Orientations and Inadequate Mentoring

Clearly, traditional study abroad was sorely lacking in the type of support that participants need. Let us fast-forward to 2013 and see what improvements have been made in the interim. In their article "Maximising Intercultural Learning in Short Term International Placements", Campbell and Walta (2015) reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of a four-week international practicum for Australian pre-service teachers designed to foster the cultural sensitivity needed in their country's diverse classrooms. In this practicum, the participants were placed in selected schools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where they first shadowed a mentoring teacher, and then taught their own classes. In contrast with traditional study abroad, this program had clear goals: During the

practicum, participants would expand their intercultural sensitivity, re-define their cultural identity, and develop a sense of global citizenship. It also had a total of four orientation sessions. Unfortunately, none of these sessions helped participants achieve the kind of growth posited in the goals.

The first two orientations took place in Australia a few months before departure. In the first session, participants met each other and talked about the more practical aspects of their experience in Malaysia such as travel, food, and appropriate attire for the climate. They were also given a 10-page booklet with information about the practicum and the various placement schools. During the second session, participants were told where they would teach, and then two Malaysia university students spoke about their experiences studying both in their country and abroad. Once, the Australians arrived in country, they went to their hostel for a third orientation, during which the manager briefed them on the accommodations and norms of expected behavior. During the final orientation, which took place on the first day of the practicum, participants met with their mentor teachers, and then listened to formal speeches given by academics from the hosting university and representatives of the Australian High Commission to Malaysia.

As you can see, participants were provided with a great deal of practical information. Unfortunately, however, they were not asked to reflect about their own culture, learn about the target culture, or anticipate in-country challenges. Consequently, when confronted with the reality of Malaysian life, the students strong aligned with attitudes of defense and denial rather than those of acceptance (Campbell & Walta, 2015, p. 9). This shows that the orientations were ineffective. Indeed, when interviewed, participants were unanimously critical of them, stating that the sessions in Australia were basically useless: "when we arrived, half of the stuff they told us either didn't happen or was completely irrelevant" (Campbell & Walta, 2015, p. 11). They were equally critical of the in-country portion of the program. Although participants did appreciate the information about their lodging and placement schools, they wanted more support from the program leaders, who were very "hands-off", for example leaving students on their own to get from the airport to the hostel. Similarly, no program staff member stayed at the hostel during the practicum to assist in solving problems. This lack of support left students feeling anxious, helpless, and alienated.

Eight-Week English Immersion 2016: Strong Orientation, Weak in-Country Support

As we have just seen, a program can have multiple orientation sessions and nonetheless fail to engage students with the issues of cultural awareness needed to thrive while abroad. Our last example, an eight-week program designed for students studying English at Ludwigs Maximilians University (LMU) in Munich, managed to avoid this pitfall. Nevertheless, it failed to support participants adequately thereafter, as Boye admits in her analysis of the program in *Intercultural Communicative Competence and Short Stays Abroad: Perceptions of Development* (2016).

The goal of this program was to provide majors with first-hand experience in an English-speaking country. Rather than study at a foreign institution as is typically the case in abroad programs, participants organized a placement in the target community, such as interning with a local company, volunteering for a charitable organization, or working in a local restaurant. To ensure maximal use of the target language, participants were required to travel alone and live with either local students or a host family.

Since these requirements would doubtlessly cause discomfort, the program's pre-departure orientation helped participants anticipate difficulties and reflect on appropriate coping strategies. As an icebreaker, program leaders gave participants a taste of what it feels like to be in an unfamiliar cultural context by having them play

the culture shock simulation game "Barnga". Devised by Thiagajaran and Steinwachs in 1990, Barnga is a simple card game, played by groups of four or five in silence. After a few familiarizing rounds, the groups are mixed up and play continues. What students do not know is that each group has learned slightly different rules, which gives rise to confusion and misunderstanding. Success in the game is achieved by understanding the unstated differences and adapting your behavior accordingly, just as one does when interacting with members of a culture whose rules are unclear.

Next, students were asked to formulate their goals for their time abroad, and then discuss these aims with the group before finally ranking them according to priority. Setting their own goals empowers participants and gives them a benchmark to aim for, knowing that they will be held accountable for their progress once they return home. The rest of the session was devoted to preparing participants for their immersion abroad. First, the program leader challenged stereotypical views that participants might have developed about the target culture or target language during their foreign language education. S/he then emphasized the importance of self-reflection while abroad, urging students to see each interaction not only as an opportunity to learn about "the British" or "the Americans", but also as a chance to think one's own national and personal identity. Finally, the leader discussed the concept of intercultural competence and the skills needed to develop it, such as investigation, analysis, decentering, monitoring, managing anxiety, and repair.

As you can see, LMU's pre-departure orientation set participants up for success. Unfortunately, once they were in country, they received no support at all. Rather, they were encouraged (but not required) to keep a reflective journal. The program designers assumed that the intercultural competence skills presented during the orientation would enable students to "identify moments when communication didn't go quite as they expected, … analyse that incident and reflect on it sufficiently to be able to learn from it" (Boye, 2016, p. 86). But what if they ran into a problem they could not solve or if they were overwhelmed by the discomfort of their situation? In such a case, they were told to email their course tutor at LMU. As you can see, after the pre-departure orientation, the program reverted back to the "sink or swim" format discussed earlier.

The fact that the LMU students received no in-country support meant that they struggled to meet the program goals. It is true that there was a compulsory debriefing once they returned home. However, in contrast to the pre-departure orientation, the focus was not on intercultural competence but rather a laundry list of themes including food, politeness, public transport, host family, cleanliness, jokes, punctuality, work, parties, clothes, and environment (Boye, 2016, p. 86). There is nothing wrong with discussing these aspects of the target culture, but there should have also been questions about the challenges that students faced, the way they dealt with them, the skills they developed, and the growth they experienced (personally, culturally, linguistically).

Maximizing Student Learning: Strong Program Design

Now that, we have seen where study abroad programs can fall short, let us talk about the ideal situation: a program that provides ample support before, during, and after our students' time abroad. What I will now describe is a kind of template that you can use when designing or improving a program. In this sense, a study abroad experience is like a well-written essay: Although the content will be different every time, the fixed components will ensure a clear, coherent product. The essay's introduction corresponds to the pre-departure orientation, where background information is provided and the program's goals are made clear. The essay's body corresponds to the in-country activities and the mentoring that allows participants to analyze and understand their experiences,

while the program debriefing is like the conclusion of an essay. This portion of the program wraps things up, highlights the main take-aways, and helps participants consolidate their learning.

Setting Clear, Reasonable Goals

Setting goals is without a doubt the most important aspect of program design, since everything else—choice of destination, lodging, activities, and assessment measures—follows therefrom. Without actionable goals, we cannot create a solid program, nor can we guide students effectively. Unfortunately, as Vande Berg notes, "[most] study abroad programs have traditionally been developed with little or no thought to what students are expected to learn or acquire during their time abroad" (2007, p. 397). Program designers must remedy this problem by creating goals that are shared with participants before departure, and then used to guide learning while in country and to assess student progress after re-entry.

There are basically two types of programmatic goals: cultural and linguistic. Which one(s) you choose will depend on your destination. If you are taking American students to Britain, you will only have cultural goals, whereas if you are taking English-speakers to Peru, you will have linguistic goals as well. In either case, one should not expect a radical transformation, since short-term study abroad is the beginning of a larger endeavor, rather than an endpoint. Consequently, even though participants may report important growth during a three or four-week program, there may be no statistically significant change in their skills based on quantitative measures.

The data shared by Watson and Wolfel (2015) illustrate this point. The researchers tracked 275 participants who went abroad after completing two years of college-level language study. These students spent an entire semester taking classes in their chosen language, and many lived with a host family as well. Nonetheless, most showed only slight improvements in their language skills, e.g., moving from intermediate-low to intermediate-mid on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency scale. This is why, for shorter trips, we should craft manageable and attainable goals, such as "Participants will feel more confident in their ability to initiate and maintain a conversation with locals when dealing with a familiar topic". Or, in terms of cultural development, we could set the following goal: "When faced with a puzzling behavior or product, participants will ask a local for an explanation that goes beyond the surface level to reveal the values and beliefs underneath".

In addition to setting programmatic goals, we should also encourage participants to craft their own goals. Doing so empowers them and encourages autonomy, placing the responsibility for learning on their shoulders. However, in order to avoid vague, unrealistic statements, we should use the S.M.A.R.T. tool to create goals that are *specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound*. For example, a student's vague "I want to become fluent in Spanish" could turn into the following S.M.A.R.T. goal: "I want to improve my ability to understand native speakers in face-to-face conversation. To do this, I will spend at least one hour each day while abroad talking to my host family, local students, or members of the community. If I can't understand something, I will ask them to slow down, repeat, or write down key words".

Figuring out the "Nuts and Bolts"

Once your goals are in place, you can decide on the practical aspects of your program: where to go, where to stay, and what to do. Let us look at each of these questions in turn, beginning with your destination. In theory, you could go anywhere in the world. However, inevitably personal interests, course offerings at the home institution, and/or your program budget, narrow the countless possibilities. For example, you might choose

Barcelona to tie in with a course on regional language variants in Spain, or you might choose Guadeloupe because your research focus is French-Caribbean literature. However, travel costs heavily influence the final choice as well. A destination closer to home will help keep expenses down, which is why it might be better to take American students to Quebec rather than France. Similarly, you can save money by picking a less touristy destination within the country, e.g., Jonquière (a small town in the Saguenay region) instead of Quebec City.

After selecting the destination, you must decide where participants will stay in country. On the one hand, if you want students to maximize their target-language practice, then living with a local family is the best choice. If, on the other hand, cultural learning is the focus of your program, then participants can stay in a dorm, a hostel, or a hotel. However, what if you have linguistic goals and homestays are not feasible? Do not worry. Participants will still have ample opportunity to use the target language; and sharing a room with someone from their home country might actually be beneficial, since it could help buffer the discomfort of culture shock. Indeed, coming back to a friendly face after a challenging day could help keep participants in the growth zone.

Similar decisions must be made when planning the study portion of your abroad program. If improvement in language skills is not a goal, then classes can be in English. Otherwise, the classes should be in the target language. Given the time limitations of short-term study abroad, it often makes sense to choose classes at a specialized language school rather than the local university. Language schools typically offer courses by the week and provide instruction at a variety of levels, so that participants will be challenged but not overwhelmed. Local university classes, on the other hand, are designed for native speakers and so should be reserved for students who already possess advanced skills. In both contexts, participants should be encouraged (or perhaps required?) to collaborate with international students instead of pairing up with friends from their home school, so as to maximize both language and culture learning.

Finally, we come to free-time activities. What else would you like participants to experience while abroad? Of course, students need time to explore and discover on their own. Yet, there should also be structured activities highlighting aspects of local culture they might not seek out on their own, such as touring a historical site, seeing how wine is made, or bargaining for treasures at the weekly flea market. In addition, whenever possible, participants should have the opportunity to interface with the host community through volunteering or service learning. For example, when my group was in Quebec, several students worked at a local thrift store, while others spent time helping out at the town's cat shelter. Although demanding, such hands-on experiences are invaluable, since they "provide positive effects in terms of attitudes, perceptions, recognizing one's ethnocentrism, and learning how to cope with cross-cultural situations" (Chwialkowska, 2020, p. 538).

Creating a Rich Cross-Cultural Orientation

Once, you have determined your program's destination, lodging, academics, and free-time activities, it is time to start recruiting participants and planning your orientation sessions. If you are running a summer program, you can start with a "nuts and bolts" meeting in January, but your focus should be on the cross-cultural orientation. How much you can cover in this session depends on how much time you have at your disposal: Clearly, if you only have few hours, you can cover far less material than if you have a few days or indeed a whole course. In my case, students going to Quebec or France are required to enroll in French 411 Study Abroad, a three-credit course that meets the week before departure and continues while abroad. We spend 20 hours together (five hours a day

for four days), with half the time devoted to developing intercultural competence and the rest to strengthening listening and speaking skills in the target language.

Of course, not everyone has the luxury of such a lengthy orientation. Therefore, here is a list of "must haves", followed by a list of components you can add if time allows. If you only have an hour or two, you can start with an interactive lecture about intercultural competence (what it is, how to develop it), also touching on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and the iceberg analogy of culture. Next, you can put students about ease by letting them know what to expect in country. This means not only talking about the phases of cross-cultural adjustment, but also telling them more about potential stressors, such as language classes and family homestays. This would also be a good time to have students identify their goals for the program as well as brainstorm strategies for dealing with in-country challenges.

If time allows, you can also include the following activities in your orientation session. A self-awareness raising activity, such as Barnga makes a great icebreaker. On the one hand, if you prefer, you can have participants reflect in small groups on a critical incident, i.e., an experience where an uncomfortable interaction occurred due to cultural differences. Help students analyze what happened and posit an explanation for the misunderstanding. You may also want to set up a Zoom call with native speakers from your host city or university. Not only does this interaction provide participants with target language practice and information about their destination, but it also ensures that there will be a few familiar faces upon arrival. If this is not feasible, see if there are any students from the target country at your institution and invite them to the orientation. On the other hand, if all else fails, find an interview with members of the target community on the Internet. All these activities will help familiarize participants with the local culture and language variant.

If putting together such a culture-based orientation seems rather daunting, fear not. You do not need to reinvent the wheel. There are several excellent guidebooks available. A time-tested classic is *Maximizing Study Abroad*, a set of two guides designed by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition in 2000 and now in its second edition[1]. The first half of the guide focuses on culture-learning strategies and is divided into easy-to-use subsections: pre-departure, in-country, post-study abroad. All the theoretical background you need for an effective pre-departure orientation can be found here, together with exercises for participants to complete individually or in groups. The second half of the guide presents language-learning strategies for listening, vocabulary, speaking and writing to help participants make the most of their time in-country.

The second guidebook is *Study Abroad. How to Get the Most out of Your Experience* (2003), written by Michele-Marie Dowell and Kelly Mirsky, two academics highly engaged in international learning at their Midwestern university. The first was the institution's study abroad coordinator, while the second was the chair of the foreign language department. They saw a need for material supporting their university-sponsored program in Spain and created this guide, which either can be the foundation of a course or used a self-directed workbook. The format of the guide is easy to understand, as it is divided into three sections, one for each part of the program: pre-departure, on-site, re-entry. Each of these sections features the same strands (personal development, learning about your own culture, learning about another culture, professional development, learning another language), as well as several exercises for each strand. In addition, the guide contains useful appendices for participants, including contact information abroad, an address book, a packing list, as well as reminders about practical matters

[1] It is an affordable addition to your program, costing only $10 on Amazon for the student guide (Kindle version) and $30 for the instructional guide for program professionals and language teachers (print version).

such as filling out transfer credit forms and getting your mail held/forwarded. Finally, the guide contains 30 pre-formatted journal pages, making it an ideal all-in-one solution for a study abroad program[2].

Providing Extensive In-country Support

As we saw previously, solely experiencing a different culture does not automatically result in growth and learning, even if students move out of their comfort zone: They need both experience and reflection and both challenge and support. And thus, as Vande Berg stresses, if intervention is to be effective, it cannot be a one-shot effort such as an orientation session: "We, or qualified staff who work with our students at the study sites abroad, need to continue to intervene actively in their learning *throughout the program*" (2007, p. 397). With respect to the in-country portion of the program, "local buddies" can do this in three ways: through mentoring by home staff, through reflective journaling by the participants, and through support.

Let us begin with mentoring which, according to Hammer (2012), is one of the most influential factors in fostering intercultural competence. However, what exactly constitutes study abroad mentoring? In practical terms, the program leader should meet frequently with participants (either one-on-one or as a group) to provide support as well as guidance in making sense of their experiences. This can be practical assistance with day-to-day tasks or mediation in the case of a particularly acute misunderstanding. Nevertheless, it can also be emotional support, lending a sympathetic ear when participants are struggling and cheering them on when they are succeeding. In addition, at least once a week, the mentor should have students review their goals, and adjust their behavior/attitudes as needed. At the same time, s/he should push participants to reflect critically on their experiences. This can be done by asking "What happened?", "How did you feel about this?", "How did you react?", "What did you learn from this event?", "What might be the deeper meaning here?".

As you can see, effective mentoring in country can put participants at ease and help them achieve their intercultural/linguistic goals. However, students should also be reflecting on their own, every day, especially since more introverted participants may not feel comfortable sharing their feelings with the mentor or discussing challenges in a group setting. Keeping a journal supports the cross-cultural learning process by providing participants with a private, safe space to "sort things out". It also creates a tangible reminder of their struggles and their triumphs that they can refer to after re-entry and share with friends, family, and peers.

If you decide to require journaling, be sure to provide the participants with clear guidelines during the pre-departure orientation, so that they know exactly what to do while in country. The format can be left up to the individual, since some may prefer a bound notebook, while others will want to create a digital blog. What must be clarified is the language, the frequency, and the content of the journal. If you do not have a linguistic program goal, then participants can write in their native language. If, on the other hand, you want participants to increase their proficiency, then they should write in the target language. As for the frequency, one to two pages a day seems to work well. Encourage participants to journal at the same time each day so that they do not skip entries. In that vein, you might use a group meeting to monitor their journaling progress. Ask them to show you their most recent entries and, if they are comfortable doing so, share an excerpt with the group. This can be a memorable learning and bonding experience.

Finally, you must be clear about the content of the journal. Some scholars advocate allowing participants to write whatever they want, while others suggest creating prompts that will accelerate the development of

---

[2] This guidebook is no longer published by Prentice Hall but can be found used for approximately $6.

intercultural competence. Yet it need not be an either-or proposition. During my Quebec program, I use both approaches. Participants can choose the focus of their daily entries, but twice a week they must also select a prompt from a list I provide. Some of these prompts are designed to get participants out into the community, while others tie back to our cross-cultural orientation session. One prompt, for example, requires them to go to a local market and make note of what they observe: sights, sounds, smells, personal interactions. What is similar to their home country? What is different? Next, they must ask a local vendor for information about an unfamiliar product. Finally, they should make a small purchase, something they can eat, share with their host family, or take home as a souvenir. In their journal, they are asked to describe the experience using sensory details, and then talk about how they felt during the experience and what they learned from it.

As we have seen, both mentoring and reflective journaling can support participants and contribute to their learning while in-country. However, there is a third type of invaluable support that has often been overlooked, and this is the "local buddy." Whenever possible, ask the local university or language school to match participants with local peers who can help them navigate the town and the understand the local culture. In programs where friends have been used, participants have reported feeling more relaxed and confident, knowing that they have someone their own age who can provide practical assistance as well as explain confusing behaviors or idiomatic expressions. The friends can also help participants adapt more quickly to the new setting by including them in plans, i.e., taking them to a local coffee house, concert, or park.

Consolidating Learning Through Post-Study Abroad Activities

Often, once students return home, the program is over. However, this should not be the case, as participants need just as much support after re-entry as they did before. Indeed, as Kortegast and Terral Boisfontaine explain, in order for students to consolidate gains made abroad, "[They] need to be provided with structured opportunities and assistance in explaining, articulating, and negotiating the meaning of their experiences post-study abroad" (2015, p. 826). These opportunities should include not only an in-person debriefing, but ideally a written reflection paper and on-campus events as well. Let us examine each possibility in more detail, beginning with the debriefing session.

A debriefing is essential because, if left to their own devices, participants generally rely on interactions with friends and family to discuss and negotiate the meaning of their time abroad. There is nothing wrong with this, of course. But, unfortunately, these groups tend to ask students about what they did rather than what they learned or the skills they developed. Therefore, sharing with friends and family can lead to simplified, superficial explanations of the time abroad (Kortegast & Terral Boisfontaine, 2015, p. 818). A faculty-led debriefing session, on the other hand, can help participants really "unpack" and analyze their experiences.

Ideally, the debriefing should be held within the first week after return, while memories are still fresh. If possible, it should take place in person, in a relaxed atmosphere with comfortable chairs, snacks, and drinks. Those who cannot attend physically should be able to join in online, so that all voices are heard. The format of the session should be informal and flexible, allowing participants to raise questions and propose topics. Nonetheless, it should adhere to the following minimal structure. First, the leader should check in with participants to see how they are feeling. Some may be happy to be back, while others may be feeling sad or disoriented, which is perfectly normal. This is called "reverse culture shock" and occurs when participants have been especially successful in embracing the target culture. After re-entry, many home country behaviors/attitudes they once took for granted may seem surprising or distressing.

After this check-in, the leader should move into the core of the debriefing, focusing on the development of knowledge and skills while abroad. To what extent do participants feel that they met their goals and those of the program? You can help them decide this by asking them about what was the biggest takeaway from their time abroad and what they learned about themselves as a result of their trip. You can also discuss what they learned about both the target language/culture and their own language/culture, being sure to ask for concrete examples to back up their claims. In addition, you can talk about challenges encountered abroad and how students overcame them. Other useful topics include the practical skills they developed in-country, the impact of study abroad on their sense of self, and any shift that may have occurred with respect to their attitude about difference.

This debriefing will prepare participants to write a final reflection paper, if you decide to require one. It is generally a good idea, since writing forces students to organize their thoughts in a way that informal discussion does not. At the end of my programs, I generally give students two weeks to submit a 4-5-page paper that addresses the questions raised in the debriefing. Waiting a few weeks allows students to readjust to their home culture and really think about their time abroad. I typically allow them to write in English because it is easier to talk about personal growth and intercultural experiences in one’s native language. Nonetheless, if participants are at a high proficiency level, they can write in the target language instead.

After the debriefing and the written reflection, the program is officially over. If possible, however, participants should have an opportunity to share their experiences on campus. There are numerous options here, but a tried-and-true activity is having students organize a study abroad celebration during the semester following their trip. Depending on the size of the cohort, participants can work individually or in small groups to create engaging multimedia presentations that highlight key events from their sojourn. To avoid simplified accounts of the abroad experience, make sure that students go beyond facts to talk about how they felt, what they learned, and how they grew.

Is It Working? Assessing Your Program

Although I have saved assessment for last, it is definitely not an afterthought. On the contrary, assessment measures need to be selected at the beginning of the design process, as soon as you have crafted your goals. The questions to consider at this point are what, when, and how to assess. With regard to what and when, the answers are relatively simple. You can assess either language learning, culture learning, or both, depending on the nature of your program (In the interest of brevity, we will only discuss measures of intercultural competence here, since they are less well-known than language proficiency measures). As for when, I would suggest at a minimum using a quantitative instrument before departure and after return. However, you can also gather data while in-country by recording interviews or collecting student-generated tests.

Answering the question of how to assess is more complex, since it involves determining what type of data collection works best for your purposes: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. Often, preference is given to quantitative data because it is clear and convincing to stakeholders. Such data seem scientific, incontrovertible, and hence reliable. However, quantitative measures rarely capture the full range of student learning, which is why we should use qualitative measures as well, as Seifen et al. (2017) explain. These authors tracked 123 participants (mostly International Studies majors) who spent six months to a year studying in Europe, Asia, or South America. In a pre-test/post-test set up, the researchers used a total of four quantitative measures to evaluate

several aspects of the experience abroad, including civic and political attitudes, apprehension towards intercultural communication, and meaning in life. They also collected qualitative data using open-ended questions.

Their results were surprising. The quantitative instruments revealed no statistically significant differences on most measures, while the qualitative data suggested that important growth and learning had indeed taken place. For example, participants reported that living abroad had helped them become more accepting of other cultures, more confident and self-reliant, and more certain about their future career. Seifen et al. (2017) conclude that open-ended questions give students a better chance to reflect on their personal experiences and are thus a useful supplement to the quantitative questionnaires. For this reason, I will present both types of instrument, leaving the final choice up to you.

Quantitative Measures: Online Format

Two widely used quantitative instruments with on-line administration are the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI) and the Global Competence Aptitude Assessment (GCAA). Since both measure intercultural competence, the choice boils down to which theoretical framework you prefer. The GPI, on the one hand, is based on a model of holistic learning and development and seeks to answer the question "How do we come to live a life that reflects a global perspective?". As a result, the instrument collects data in three domains: the cognitive ("How do I know?"), the intrapersonal ("Who am I?"), and the interpersonal ("How do I relate to others?"). Each of these domains contains two scales, one for development and the other for acquisition. This means that the results of the GPI fall into six different areas: cognitive → knowing and knowledge; intrapersonal → identity and affect; interpersonal → social responsibility and social interaction[3].

The GCAA, on the other hand, calls to mind Deardorff's model of intercultural competence, since both focus on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for intercultural interactions. However, whereas as Deardorff's model is cyclical, the GCAA model is more reminiscent of an atom. The nucleus of the model is self-awareness, i.e., the ability to know yourself and how you fit into your own culture. The next layer is internal readiness and comprises the attitudes needed for intercultural growth: risk taking, open-mindedness, and attention to diversity. The third and final layer is external readiness and refers to the knowledge of the world a person has acquired through education and life experiences. It is at this level that we find historic perspective, global awareness, intercultural capability, and collaboration across cultures. If you use the GCCA, the data will be presented in terms of these constructs using bar graphs and percentile charts. Each report will also contain detailed improvement opportunities, questions for self-reflection, plus developmental resources for self-study followed by suggested activities[4].

Quantitative Measures: Pen-and-Paper Format

Let us now turn our attention to pen-and-paper instruments that can provide you with quantitative data about participants' intercultural competence. Here, you basically have two choices: adopt an existing questionnaire or create your own. If you want to go with an instrument that has been rigorously tested, try Chen and Sarosta's Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). When taking this questionnaire, participants use a 1-5 Likert scale to indicate their reaction to 24 statements concerning intercultural communication, such as "I enjoy interacting with people

---

[3] For more information about the GPI, see Braskamp et al.: "*Assessing Progress in Global Learning and Development of Students With Education Abroad Experiences*" (2009).
[4] For more information about the GCAA, see Kaushik et al.: "*The Global Aptitude Assessment Model: A Critical Perspective*" (2017).

from different cultures” and “I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures”. These statements correlate with one of five dimensions of intercultural competence: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Thus, a quick survey can yield a great deal of information about participants’ intercultural skills[5].

The second option is to create your own instrument. Doing so requires more effort but can be very effective, since you can tailor the assessment to your program’s specific goals. You can start from scratch, as Boye did when creating her four-section questionnaire focusing on students’ attitudes, goals, intercultural skills, and beliefs about culture learning. Or you can adapt an existing instrument for your purposes as Chwialkowska did in her study, where she modified Rew’s Cultural Awareness Scale (CAS) in order to determine what factors contribute to participant comfort/discomfort while studying abroad. Initially designed to measure the preparedness of nursing students, Rew’s scale contains 36 items that address cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, cultural competence, nursing clinical practice, and nursing education. Items include statements such as “I believe nurses’ own cultural beliefs influence their nursing care decisions” and “I am less patient with individuals of certain cultural backgrounds”[6].

Qualitative Measures: Interviews and Student-Generated Texts

Finally, let us consider qualitative measures of intercultural competence. The most prevalent approaches here are participant interviews and student-generated texts. Santoro and Major, for instance, used interviews to investigate what teacher education students perceive to be the benefits of a short-term international study experience. These interviews, which were conducted two months after re-entry, lasted on average 1.5 hours and aimed to elicit the following information: the participants’ reasons for going abroad; what they expected to learn from the trip and whether their expectations were met; how the trip contributed to their development as a teacher; a situation that challenged them and why; and how they managed the discomfort of an unfamiliar environment (2012, p. 314). These interviews were audio recorded, and then transcribed and coded, enabling the researchers to identify patterned regularities that they transformed into analyzable themes.

Answers to such open-ended questions can also be elicited in written format. This approach has the advantage of being less time consuming in terms of data analysis, since no transcription is necessary. You can also use participants’ journal entries as a data source; as long as they agree ahead of time to share these texts. Yet whether you choose an oral or written format, be aware that many stakeholders may mistrust qualitative data because individuals often unintentionally misrepresent their behavior when asked to self-report. They may do this because they do not know how to properly measure their growth/learning or because they want to “look good”, even if the survey is anonymous. Nonetheless, it is essential to give participants a voice and allow them to share their experiences in their own words. For this reason, most scholars agree that qualitative data should be collected at least once during the program, if time allows.

Conclusion

As we have seen, study abroad can be a truly life-changing experience for participants, enabling them to develop autonomy, self-confidence, and self-awareness, as well as linguistic and cultural skills. However, this

---

[5] For more information about the ISS, see Chen and Sarosta: “*The Development and Validation of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale*” (2000).

[6] For more information about the CAS, see Rew et al.: “*Measuring Cultural Awareness in Nursing Students*” (2003).

type of transformation will not occur if students remain in their comfort zone. To truly grow, they must embrace challenge and dissonance, which can be quite uncomfortable. This is why the program itself must provide the structure and support that participants need, beginning with a cross-cultural orientation before departure, continuing with mentoring and guided reflection while in country, and tying everything together after re-entry with a debriefing, more reflection, and opportunities for sharing. Throughout the program, various assessment measures can be used to gauge both participants' learning and the effectiveness of your design. By following the template provided here, we can create strong study abroad programs that maximize student learning and ignite a desire for more intercultural experiences.

References

Boye, S. (2016). *Intercultural communicative competence and short stays abroad: perceptions of development*. Muenster, DE: Waxmann Verlag.

Braskamp, L., Braskamp, D., & Merrill, K. (2009). Assessing progress in global learning and development of students with education abroad experiences. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 18*(1), 101-118.

Campbell, C., & Walta, C. (2015). Maximising intercultural learning in short term international placements: Findings associated with orientation programs, guided reflection and immersion. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 40*(10), 1-15.

Chwialkowska, A. (2020). Maximizing cross-cultural learning from exchange study abroad programs: Transformative learning theory. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 24*(5), 535-554.

Dowell, M., & Mirsky, K. (2003) *Study abroad: How to get the most out of your experience*. London: Pearson Publishing.

Hammer, M. (2012). The intercultural development inventory: A new frontier in assessment and development of intercultural competence. In M. Vande Berg et al. (Eds.), *Student learning abroad* (pp. 115-136). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Kortegast, C., & Terral Boisfontaine, M. (Nov. 2015). Beyond "It was good": Students' post-study abroad practices for negotiating meaning. *Journal of College Student Development, 56*(8), 812-828.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Paige, R. et al. (2020). *Maximizing study abroad* (2nd ed.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition.

Prouty, D., Panicucci, J., & Collinson, R. (Eds.). (2007). *Adventure education: Theory and applications*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Santora, N., & Major, J. (2012). Learning to be a culturally responsive teacher through international study trips: transformation or tourism? *Teaching Education, 23*(3), 309-322.

Schenker, T. (2019). Fostering global competence through short-term study abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 31*(2), 139-157.

Seifen, T., Rodriguez, Y., & Johnson, L. (2017). Growth and meaning through study abroad: Assessing student transformation with mixed methods. *Journal of Transformative Learning, 6*(1), 6-21.

Vande Berg, M. (2007). Intervening in the learning of U.S. students abroad. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 11*(3/4), 392-399.

Watson, J., & Wolfel, R. (2015). The intersection of language and culture in study abroad: Assessment and analysis of study abroad outcomes. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad, 25*(1), 57-72.