

Instructor-Led Engagement and Immersion Programs: Transformative Experiences of Study Abroad

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Study abroad is associated with transformative experiences—that is, events that lead to a change in how a person sees the world. In this study the authors sought to ascertain whether there are common themes of transformative experiences and whether these transformations are related to particular types of study abroad programs. Principles guiding the authors' research and interview coding scheme are informed by study abroad and transformative education literature.

Study abroad can be categorized in three types: instructor-led topic/subject focused, engagement activity instructor-led, and immersion through university semester enrollment. The project engaged debates about whether a short-term faculty-led study abroad is as transformative as a full immersion semester at a foreign institution, and whether an international community engagement study abroad experience fosters transformations different from or similar to the other two types.

Interview Survey and Coding

The authors developed a pilot survey instrument and conducted recorded interviews to check internal consistency in delivery and question response. Subsequently, a random number process was used to select from 303 student participants in College of Agriculture and Natural Resources study abroad programs between 2008 and 2010. The 15 interviews, five for each type, averaged 20 minutes each. The open-ended interview questions asked participants to discuss their experience, highlighting significant, transformative, and resonant moments. Pilot interviews were coded by four researchers to verify and clarify codes and check inter-rater reliability. Final interviews were coded by two researchers with agreement on final codes. Interviews were coded for participants' articulation of epistemic learning (respondent articulated shift in understanding where and how learning happens), relational learning (respondent indicated shift in understanding nationality,

group, or self because of their connectedness), personal adaptive learning (respondent indicated shift in image of self as a moral actor with the capacity to respond to challenges), philosophical learning (respondent indicated a shift in definitions of foundational definitions of being), and skills development (respondent articulated skills and attitudes useful for study abroad experience).

Findings

In instructor-led topic/subject focused programs and immersion-university semester enrollment programs, epistemic and philosophical learning transformations are the most cited, whereas in engagement activity instructor-led programs, personal adaptive and epistemic learning transformations are the most cited. All of the study abroad types resulted in recognition of learning as the result of disorientation and a general shift in worldview for the students.

Instructor-led study abroad participants articulated the highest rates of everyday learning, possibly indicating that these programs promote the recognition of this skill. Interestingly, participants in this type also indicated the least frequent recognition of learning outside the curriculum. This may indicate that instructor-led students recognized both the importance of everyday conversation to learning and that this opportunity for learning was built into their study abroad curriculums. These responders' greater attribution of overall learning experience to curriculum is confirmed by their low articulation of learning as reflection, indicating that their learning was encapsulated in curricular experiences.

Engagement study abroad students articulated the most change in their conception and practice of learning. This seems to indicate that students on engagement study abroad articulate a broader awareness of learning styles and techniques. Similarly, engagement study abroad students more frequently articulated responses that framed learning as the result of disorientation. This may indicate a correlation between recognizing disorientation as learning and recognizing multiple pathways to learning.

Instructor-led and immersion program students articulated the highest rates of revision in their conceptions of nation and citizenship. Engagement program participants indicated a greater recognition of themselves as individual problem solvers of everyday or challenging problems but had the lowest recognition of national identities. This difference among the types may occur because engagement programs use projects as a core organizing feature. These students may focus more on daily requirements and

tasks, minimizing their awareness of themselves as embodying a particular national identity. This research was conducted through the Bailey Scholars Graduate Fellowship Program.

About the Authors

Natalie Graham is a University Distinguished Fellow at Michigan State University. Her research interests include identity performance and consumption, Black popular music, place-based studies, participatory engagement, and creative writing. Graham earned her bachelor's degree in English with a minor in creative writing from the University of Florida, and she is a Ph.D. candidate in American studies at Michigan State University.

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Transformative Experiences of Study Abroad: Instructor-Led, Engagement and Immersion Programs

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Introduction

Study abroad is famed for fostering transformative experiences for college students.

- Anecdotal information tells us that students feel they have changed during their study abroad.
- Research tells us that study abroad can enhance foreign language skills, understanding of different cultures and has the strongest impact on first time study abroad participants.
- Study abroad can be broadly categorized into 3 types: Instructor-Led Topic/Subject Focused, Engagement Activity Instructor-Led, and Immersion through University Semester Enrollment
- We do not know if there are common themes of transformative experiences and if these transformations are related to particular types of programs.
- There is also debate if a shorter term faculty led study abroad is equally transformative as a full immersion semester long study abroad at a foreign institution.
- Or, if an international community engagement study abroad fosters different, or similar, types of transformations as the other two types.

For this study, transformative experiences are defined as events that lead to a change in how a person sees the world. These events can be a culmination of everyday experiences while studying abroad or a single event which re-frames how a person sees the world.

Method

Three Study Abroad Program Types:
Instructor-Led Topic/Subject Focused
Engagement Activity Instructor-Led
Immersion University Semester Enrollment

Survey Development

Pilot survey instrument tested by 4 researchers with non-CANR study abroad participants. Interviews recorded for checking internal consistency in delivery and question response probes.

Random Sample Participant Selection:

Random number process for selection from 303 student participants in College of Agriculture & Natural Resource study abroad programs, 2008 – 2010

Code Development

The coding scheme is adapted from theories about transformative learning, such as the work of Cranton and Mezirow.

Transcription & Coding

Pilot interviews coded by 4 researchers to verify and clarify codes and check inter-rater reliability.
Final interviews coded by 2 researchers with agreement on final codes.

Coding: Transformative Learning Experiences

1.0 Epistemic Learning

Respondent articulated shift in or deepening understanding of where and how learning happens

- 1.1 Recognizing learning styles and techniques – hands-on, lecture, experiential, stretch
- 1.2 Learning that learning is unplanned – outside of the curriculum
- 1.3 Learning that is a result of "everyday" interaction/conversation
- 1.4 Learning that learning happens as a result of reflection
- 1.5 Learning happens as a result of disorientation, i.e. "getting out of the box"
- 1.6 Learning as a result of seeing one's ignorance

2.0 Relational Learning

Respondent indicated deepened understanding of an entity or entities because of their relationship with each other

- 2.1 Recognizing the juxtaposition of U.S. as a nation in global context
- 2.2 Learning about self in family, local context
- 2.3 Learning about self in national context
- 2.4 Learning about self in global context
- 2.5 Learning about material realities as a function of social networks

3.0 Personal Adaptive Learning

(Evaluation of psychological/moral/ethical)

Respondent indicated shift in impermissibility of self as a moral actor with the capacity to respond to challenges.

- 3.1 Evaluation of self as an individual problem-solver of challenging problems
- 3.2 Evaluation of self as a member of a group that can solve challenging problems
- 3.3 Evaluation of self as having adopted skills directly applicable to "everyday" problems
- 3.4 Evaluation of self as having applied skills to problems since return

4.0 Philosophical Learning

(Indication of philosophical/aesthetic)

Respondent indicated a shift in definitions of foundational definitions of being.

- 4.1 Articulation of general shift in worldview
- 4.2 Articulation of national identities – how others see US and how we see others
- 4.3 Articulation of specific recognition of socio-cultural categories, i.e. what it means to be a woman, what it means to be African
- 4.4 Articulation of specific recognition of socio-cultural values, i.e. what it means to be smart, good, or beautiful
- 4.5 Articulation of specific recognition of socio-cultural action, i.e. what it means to work, to play, to learn

5.0 Useful Skills and Attitudes

5.1 Recognition of useful attitudes and skills for study abroad experience, in country

5.2 Recognition of useful attitudes and skills for study abroad experience, in U.S.

6.0 When Transformation Occurred

6.1 Aha

6.2 Gradual

6.3 Upon Return

7.0 Prior Study Abroad/International Experience

Semi Structured Interview Protocol

Interviews conducted by 3 graduate researchers and 2 undergraduate researchers. 15 interviews, 5 for each type, average 20 minutes each.

1. What initially interested you in a study abroad experience?
2. Could you describe what your study abroad experience was like for you, what were your most significant experiences during your study abroad?
3. Do you feel the experience changed you in any way? Is there anything you see, understand, feel, value, or do differently today than before your trip?
4. What would you say is the most important benefit of a study abroad experience?
5. What advice do you have to other students embarking on a study abroad experience?

Data

Findings

Instructor-led Topic/Subject Focused Programs:

Epistemic and Philosophical learning transformations are the most cited.

Engagement Activity Instructor-Led Programs:

Personal Adaptive and Epistemic learning transformations are the most cited.

Immersion - University Semester Enrollment Programs:

Epistemic and Philosophical learning transformations are the most cited.

All of the study abroad types resulted in recognition of learning as the result of disorientation and a general shift in worldview for the students.

Instructor-led study abroad participants articulated the highest rates of everyday learning, possibly indicating that these programs promote the recognition of this skill. Interestingly, this type also indicated the least frequent recognition of learning outside of the curriculum.

This may indicate that instructor-led students recognized both the importance of everyday connection to learning and that this opportunity for learning was built into their study abroad curriculum. Their greater attribution of overall learning experience to curriculum is confirmed by the fact that these respondents also had the articulation of learning as reflection, indicating that the learning was encapsulated in the program itself and not as self-directed.

Engagement study abroad students articulated the most change in their conception and practice of learning.

The most frequent type of frequency of responses was 1.1 and 1.5. This seems to indicate that students on Engagement study abroad articulate a broader awareness of learning styles and techniques. Similarly, Engagement study abroad participants frequently articulated responses that indicated learning as resulting from disorientation. This may indicate a connection between recognizing disorientation as learning and recognizing multiple pathways to learning.

Instructor-led and Immersion program students articulated the highest rates of revision in their conceptions of nation and citizenship.

Engagement program participants indicated a greater recognition of themselves as individual problem solvers of everyday or challenging problems while they had the lowest recognition of national identities.

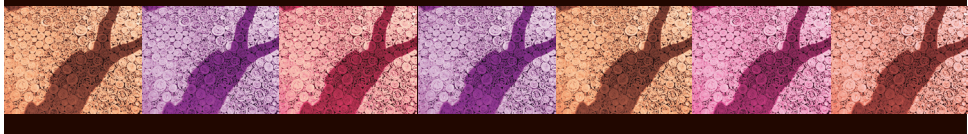
This difference among the types may be due to the fact that Engagement programs use projects as a core organizing feature of the program. These students may focus more on the daily requirements and tasks, increasing their awareness of themselves as embodying a particular national identity. Working with communities to solve problems seems to give these students a greater sense of their ability to solve problems.

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Bailey Scholars Research Team

The research is by the 2010 - 2011 Graduate Fellows of the Bailey Scholars Program: Natalie Graham and Pat Crawford; with Robert Brown, Eric Cova, Rhonda Crackel, Suzanne Lang, Reg Motley, and Brianna Ziegler.



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