

Crossing the Globe: Why Studying Abroad Is Essential to the Future of LIS Education

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Increasingly, Library and Information Science (LIS) programs are offering study-abroad opportunities for students to have broader global classroom experiences to gain knowledge and exposure and to think beyond the confines of geographic boundaries. While study-abroad courses have long been a part of undergraduate and graduate education in North America, few opportunities exist for students in LIS. This paper argues for their continued offering as well as for the creation of new study-abroad courses in LIS. The simple reason is that global study programs help students understand the interconnectedness and interdependence of the world (Smith, Hallam, & Ghosh, 2012). They expose students to other practices in the information professions and create opportunities for library science programs to tap into new markets for recruitment. They also foster critical thinking on a range of issues including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, and gender. A study-abroad program will serve as a model for discussing these factors as well as pedagogy, strategies for student learning, and cross-classroom collaboration.

Keywords: cultural immersion, global studies, LIS education, pedagogy, study abroad

The increase in globalization at the end of the twentieth century allowed for greater numbers of students from more diverse backgrounds and fields of study to go abroad. Global study programs have become more viable and affordable for students, and faculty now have a better grasp of maintaining and meeting the learning outcomes. While, ultimately, studying abroad for a lengthy period offers more opportunities for professional and cultural immersion, some researchers have found that the length of stay is insignificant in terms of the degree to which students are globally engaged (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, & Jon, 2009). Specifically, researchers found that when they surveyed more than six thousand study abroad alumni from 20 universities over a period of 50 years, there was no significant difference in global engagement between students who had studied abroad for longer and shorter periods.

KEY POINTS

- LIS should develop more study abroad opportunities for students.
- Global study programs help develop critical thinking skills and help prepare students to work in the global marketplace.
- Strategies for curriculum design, pedagogy and student learning.

Assertions have been made that study-abroad students attain important knowledge and intercultural competency that enables them to succeed in an expanding global marketplace (Evans, Finch, Toncar, & Reid, 2008). It has also been argued that students choose to study abroad for personal development and to enhance friendships (Janda, 2016). This is especially important for students who are online learners. Effective global study programs require intensive and sustained contact with students, instructors, and individuals from different nations and cultures. Most models for study-abroad programs provide opportunities for students to travel and live in different countries and experience the culture there. The intent is that students will return with a greater understanding of similarities and differences between cultures, an enhanced educational experience, and insight into future employment, new interpersonal networks, and personal growth. However, international education is not solely for the student. As Buergethal and Torney (1976, p. 51) cite from the Becker/Anderson report, “‘International education’ is a term of many usages and hence of multiple meanings. We sometimes use the phrase in referring to cross-cultural or comparative studies of educational systems and practices . . . educational assistance programs to developing nations, as well as in discussions of the educational activities of such agencies as UNESCO. We also think of the international exchange of students and teachers as programs in international education.”

In 1976, UNESCO suggested the need for more study-abroad programs and educational exchanges that would promote positive social transformation. According to the 1974 UNESCO Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms,

international education should further the appropriate intellectual and emotional development of the individual. It should develop a sense of social responsibility and of solidarity with less privileged groups and should lead to observance of the principles of equality in everyday conduct. It also should help to develop qualities, aptitudes and abilities which enable the individual to acquire a critical understanding of problems at the national and the international level; to understand and explain facts, opinions and ideas; to work in a group; to accept and participate in free discussions; to observe the elementary rules of procedure applicable to any discussion; and to base value-judgements and decisions on a rational analysis of relevant facts and factors. (United Nations, 1974, sec. III.5)

While this paper focuses primarily on LIS study-abroad programs in the United States and North America, I would be remiss not to mention library science programs in other countries. According to the American Library Association (2018), Australia, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand,

Singapore, and the United Kingdom have “formal” accreditation for the Master’s in Library and Information Science degree. For example, the Berlin School of Library and Information Science in Germany has study-abroad opportunities through the Erasmus and Sokrates exchange programs, which allows students to study throughout the European Union (and, in the case of the Sokrates exchange, throughout Europe more broadly). In New Zealand, the Master of Information Science (MIS) program at Victoria University of Wellington appears not to offer study-abroad programs but offers many online courses through the WISE consortium. Singapore seems to have study-abroad options through study exchange programs for undergraduates and graduates in countries such as Taiwan, Norway, Finland, and Germany. Similarly, Australia and the United Kingdom have partnerships with the United States, and nearly all these institutions allow students to do study abroad through the larger universities.

Students who study abroad develop enhanced cultural understanding and are motivated to engage in future international travel experiences (Blanco, 2013). Targeting international students for short-term exchanges for study in or outside the United States is also an opportunity to expand the LIS education universe. In 2012 it was estimated that international exchanges in all 50 states contributed \$22.7 billion to the US economy (Institute of International Education, 2012). Focusing on this group may provide opportunities for library science programs to make up for decreasing enrollments (Institute of International Education, 2012; Ludlum, Ice, & Sheetz-Nguyen, 2013). Students would benefit not only from the acquisition of a language in a native environment but also from enrichment provided by total immersion in the culture of the receiving country. Furthermore, by targeting more international students for short-term exchanges or short-term study, the cultural diversity of the classroom would be enhanced academically, adding to the globalization of the classroom and the expansion of LIS education internationally. After all, as President Lyndon B. Johnson contended, “International education cannot be the work of one country. It is the responsibility and promise of all nations. It calls for free exchange and full collaboration. . . . The knowledge of our citizens is one treasure which grows only when it is shared” (NAFSA, 2018).

Many students who study abroad may describe their experience as both rewarding and challenging. For students who identify as racial or ethnic minorities, some of the rewards and challenges may be directly related to identity. For example, when you travel abroad, you are perceived through a new cultural lens that may categorize and interpret your race, ethnicity, and other identity attributes quite differently from what you are used to in your country. For this reason, it especially important for those who are representative of underrepresented groups to study abroad. McElroy & Bridges (2017) found that students of color participate in global study programs at a much lower rate compared to their white counterparts (see [Table 1](#)). Being abroad will present opportunities to

Table 1: Percentages of students, by race/ethnicity, enrolled in US universities and colleges vs. students who studied abroad (2014/15)

Race/ethnicity	% of all university and college students	% of university and college students who studied abroad
White	58.3	72.9
Hispanic or Latino(a)	16.5	8.8
Asian or Pacific Islander	6.6	8.1
Black or African American	14.5	5.6
Multiracial	3.3	4.1
American Indian or Alaska Native	.8	.5

Source: *McElroy & Bridges (2017)*.

think about identity in a new cultural context, and this can be a rewarding learning experience that challenges the way you think about yourself, your community, and your place in the world.

Justification for the study

The *Educating Urban Librarians Summit* (Wayne State University, 2008) found that information professionals who work in urban communities should possess specific cultural competencies, one of which is determined to be “[a]n understanding and appreciation of various cultures, a respect for diversity and a willingness to deliver library and information services to each and every patron” (p. 5). Living, even for a short period, in another country will provide opportunities for participants to gain first-hand knowledge of the social, economic, political, and religious climate of the host country that shapes everyday life. Students will also gain perspectives on many of the critical issues facing information centers by making connections with users, library professionals, and in some cases library students and LIS faculty from other programs.

Developing and leading a study-abroad program will not only provide insight on how students respond to cultural immersion as a means of achieving cultural competency, but it will also highlight how sustained connections, friendships, and alliances formed with professionals in a host country can be used to enhance the cultural competency of LIS students. Furthermore, it provides opportunities for students interested in managing information centers or information systems with a global perspective.

While research on the impact of study abroad on both participants and host communities is limited, certainly many participants in international exchange demonstrate a deepened appreciation for the importance of cultural immersion, as demonstrated in experience teaching study-abroad courses. Although several studies have explored the

internationalization of LIS education (Abdullahi & Kajberg, 2004; Hirsh et al., 2015), very little research has been published on global study programs in LIS. A study by Carroll (1969) reports on the practicability of incorporating a year-long study-abroad course. More recently, Luckert (2014) discusses how a LIS study-abroad class to St. Petersburg, Russia, led to other opportunities between the University of Maryland Libraries and libraries and institutions in St. Petersburg. As faculty librarians, McElroy and Bridges (2017) describe the process of developing a study-abroad course and how their course strengthens information literacy skills.

Methodology

To determine how many LIS programs in the United States and North America offer a global study course, 60 LIS school websites were reviewed. Only 22 schools offer a global study course: University of Alabama, SUNY Albany, University of Alberta, Catholic University of America, East Carolina University, Emporia State University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Kent State University, University of Kentucky, Long Island University, University of Maryland, University of North Carolina (both Chapel Hill and Greensboro), North Carolina Central University, University of Pittsburgh, Pratt Institute, Simmons College, University of Southern Mississippi, St. John's University, Syracuse University, University of Washington, and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

A limitation of the study is that the review of LIS programs relied on data taken from each school's departmental website. Therefore, if schools have recently created a global studies course or if a course has not been offered for some time, it is not reflected in these preliminary findings.

The global study course that I designed, "Visions of Italy: Culture in 21st Century Rome and Florence," serves as a model for other study-abroad courses. It highlights pedagogy, strategies for student learning, and cross-classroom collaboration. "Visions of Italy" is a two-week course that introduces the management and operations of religious and other cultural archives, records, manuscripts, objects, and collections. I have taught the course twice, in the summer of 2015 and 2017.

The planning process

A global studies program requires a great deal of planning. Before planning and developing a course, it is important to assess the need for a program, so a few questions should be asked, including but not limited to the following: Does the program fill a curricular need for the department? Does the program enhance the university's mission? Is there an existing program that already meets these needs? Does the program offer something unique that cannot be accomplished on campus? Will this program have a strong academic component? Is there a specific reason that this program should take place in the specified location instead of in the city of your university? What is that reason? Does the time of year when

the program is planned appeal to students? Is the length of the program appropriate for the academic content? Are seasonal costs, airfare, lodging, food, etc., higher or lower during the time when this program will be offered? Is the political/economic situation stable in the destination country? Does the program include a service learning component?

When assessing the program, faculty directors should consider potential enrollment. It is essential that there are enough students to sustain the program. If enrollment is low, budget considerations may cause the program to be cancelled. The faculty leader should consider the following: What is the current enrollment in related courses? Will the program attract students outside your department? For example, will your class appeal to other graduate and undergraduate programs on campus as well as to other LIS programs? Does the course require prerequisites that could limit potential enrollment?

Once you have determined that you will develop a program, it is important to speak with your study-abroad office and the dean or chair of your program to ensure that you have institutional support. A timeline should be established to keep you on track. Planning a year ahead of your program is advisable, as there are many factors involved such as to marketing the course, recruiting students, and working with the host country. Fortunately, Catholic University has a campus in Rome, so I had strong support with housing and other administrative issues. Language was not a challenge for me, largely because of the Rome staff. If you are planning on visiting a country where you are not fluent in the language, one option is to recruit a graduate assistant who may be familiar with or fluent in the language to help with the logistics of the course.

The next step is to draft a program proposal and submit it to your chair and dean for approval. It is important to include a description of the program and for faculty leaders to meet with their global studies office to discuss the proposal guidelines. Give the office a preliminary draft (even if not yet signed) of the proposal, including the itinerary, so that they can start the vetting process. The next step is to discuss the program budget and determine a program fee.

Cultural competence

Cultural competence is the “ability of professionals to understand the needs of diverse populations” (Overall, 2009, p. 176). While cultural competence has been widely examined in LIS (Cooke, 2016; Hill & Kumasi, 2012; Montague, 2013; Overall, 2009), rarely has it been discussed within the context of global studies. Overall offers the most theoretical description of cultural competence: “the ability to understand and respect cultural differences and to address issues of disparity among diverse populations competently” (p. 176). Overall’s description of global studies is helpful for instructors leading study-abroad programs. Authentic cultural competence can occur when students engage in dialogue with individuals

from diverse backgrounds whenever possible, because global awareness and intercultural competencies can be developed only through encounters with diverse populations within dominant cultures. Mintz and Hesser (1996, p. 28) contend that “[a]n appreciation for and an understanding of diversity does not necessarily happen by chance. Working within a diverse context requires deliberate attention to cultural differences and commonalities, as well as to the links among power, privilege, prejudice, and oppression.”

Study-abroad programs have defined their success by the extent to which students are immersed in the host culture and develop positive relationships with individuals in the host country. It is important for instructors to know that students must go beyond just merely living in a host country by being exposed to the diversity of people, ideas, and experiences from the culture of the country they are visiting. Engaging in dialogue with individuals from diverse backgrounds can foster global awareness, and cultural competence can be developed through encounters with diverse populations within cultures. Theodore Gochenour (1993) of the School for International Training has defined the “success” of experiential study abroad as “the degree to which a person is able to enter into respectful, appreciative (though not necessarily admiring) relationships with a culture other than his or her own, and discover some values that have personal significance and a sense of common humanity” (pp. 2–3).

Gaining cultural competence abroad will help LIS professionals in their everyday work, regardless of whether they choose to work in the United States or internationally. Moreover, the development of cultural competence skills and cultural and social cognizance benefits LIS students, their potential for future employment, the LIS profession, and the constituents in the communities they serve.

Pedagogy

Experiential education is a useful lens to use when teaching a study-abroad course. Although study abroad is not always rooted in the philosophies of experiential education, global studies and experiential education are compatible because they share the common goal of empowering students and preparing them to become responsible global citizens. Experiential education was first conceptualized in the twentieth century when notable scholars John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, Paulo Freire, Carl Roger, and others developed theories of education rooted in and transformed by experience. According to Itin (1999), experiential education involves “carefully chosen experiences supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis,” which are “structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results.”

One of the fundamental beliefs of experiential education is that experiences are not educational in and of themselves. Dewey (1897) contended that learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.

Although punctuated by knowledge milestones, learning does not end at an outcome, nor is it always evidenced in performance. Rather, learning occurs through the course of connected experiences in which knowledge is modified and re-formed. As Dewey suggested, “education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience: . . . the process and goal of education are one and the same thing” (p. 79). Dewey further described some experiences as “mis-educative” if they have “the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.” For example, a student who concludes from a negative experience while studying abroad that all people from a host country are rude has had a mis-educative experience. The student has not benefitted from experiential education, which involves the transformation of experience into knowledge, which is then applied and tested through action (Kolb, 1984). The National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) has proposed the following basic “Principles of Good Practice”: intention, authenticity, planning, clarity, monitoring and assessment, reflection, evaluation, and acknowledgment (NSEE, 1998). These ideologies may serve as crucial elements of experiential education and study abroad.

Global study-abroad programs have changed how we think about the classroom. While the concept of the global classroom is conceived to connect educators and students across the world using technology (Schisa et al., 2011), the authors posit that the idea of the global classroom can occur anywhere learning occurs—nationally or globally. For instance, a global classroom can be at the Forum in Rome or at the Eiffel Tower in Paris. In other words, the global classroom provides opportunities for students to gain knowledge, exposure, and experience and to think beyond the confines of geographic boundaries.

When teaching a study-abroad program, it is important to use a variety of instructional methods and activities that include lectures, discussions, site visits, presentations from professionals from the host country, and collaborative learning opportunities. I found these strategies to be effective in Italy. McElroy and Bridges (2017) suggest the following questions when planning your course:

- What are your expectations for student behavior? What are their expectations for you? How will you build community in the classroom and outside?
- How will you accommodate unexpected developments? (E.g., if a planned activity is canceled, a new topic of interest emerges.)
- How will you assess student learning, or the overall success of your program? What reporting is required by your institution?

Critical thinking skills are essential learning objectives for students when designing your study-abroad course.

Student learning outcomes

The overarching outcome for student learning is for students to develop an international perspective in order to live and work effectively in an increasingly global society. Additional outcomes include the following:

- students should contextually appreciate, analyze, and articulate global competence;
- students should successfully live and thrive in a culture that is not their own, and grow individually and personally from the experience;
- students should incorporate an interest in international travel into their lifelong learning plan;
- students should incorporate specific cultural, geopolitical, economic, and social knowledge into their academic and personal contexts;
- students should develop skills to appreciate visual, historical, and experiential cultural products of cultures different from their own.

Computer-mediated communications allows students and teachers to work cooperatively with their peers around the world. One strategy for cross-classroom collaboration in a global study context can be used during the trip: students who are not able to travel abroad with the class can still participate in the class through Skype or other communication technologies. Another strategy is continuing the conversation once everyone has returned from the host country. This was the case once when we returned from Italy. I organized space on social media to reflect on some of the issues that arose in Italy as well as how those issues intersect with emerging issues at home. I found this to be particularly effective, since many of the students who participated in the course were from other LIS programs.

Assessment

Appropriate assessments that are embedded into a study-abroad course will complement the learning goals of the program and provide course assessment data. Since students will be engaged in activities that simulate real-world experiences, these activities should allow for students and faculty to engage in dialogues that invoke students' critical thinking skills.

I have used the following types of assessment when teaching my course:

- Journals/reflective essays: Journaling encourages students to reflect on their experiences as they are occurring and to look critically at their experience and their environment. Journaling assignments can also serve as an assessment function by asking students to describe what they have learned that they could not have learned in a campus-based course.
- Digital essay: The digital essay allows students to demonstrate their technology skills as well as to highlight what they have learned in the course using images.

- Instructional feedback: Feedback was solicited at the mid-point of the course. Formal course evaluations and suggestions that students made about improving student learning outcomes were incorporated into the design of the next course and I was able to see if the next group valued those changes.

The assessment and analysis of the experiences that students have while studying in an international environment are critical. Review of student evaluations and frequent checking in with students during the course help determine the nature of the experience as well as where to focus future efforts.

Conclusion

Few experiences are as transformative to the development of a student as study abroad (McElroy & Bridges, 2017). As previously mentioned, there are tremendous benefits for students who participate in global education opportunities. Full immersion in another culture increases one's cultural sensitivities and expands one's mind to the complexity of the world. It further increases the competitiveness of students as they seek employment. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of LIS and the impending role of global education in libraries (Marcum, 2016), it is especially important for students to be globally engaged. When students study abroad, not only does it give them a perspective on how other cultures organize and manage their information, but it also affords them the opportunity to obtain work in these venues and help shape the global information landscape.

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