



Increasing diversity in international education: Programming for non-traditional students through an alternative curriculum model

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Abstract

This paper looks at an alternative curriculum model for study abroad designed specifically to address some of the needs of non-traditional students enrolled in an online education program. In order to meet the needs of non-traditional students and provide quality international programming for them, it is necessary first to understand their restraints to studying abroad, and then to design alternative educational models that can address these challenges. The paper describes the challenges of balancing the need to create quality international learning opportunities for education students, with the limitations faced by non-traditional online adult learners who have families and full-time jobs. It is based on an action research case study of two study abroad programs implemented for online students at a northeastern four-year research-one institution of higher education.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of the problem

The demand for online learning has increased rapidly in the past decade. Education providers worldwide are offering online courses and programs to increase flexibility in time and place of learning and to increase access to education for various groups, such as non-traditional students who need more flexibility in their schedules due to time constraints, as a result of family and work responsibilities, or because of geographic limitations (Jakobsdóttir, 2008). Accommodating this same group of students when faced with demands for face-to-face offerings becomes a unique challenge.

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This paper looks at an alternative curriculum model for study abroad designed specifically to address some of the needs of non-traditional students enrolled in an online education program. In order to meet the needs of non-traditional students and provide quality international programming for them, it is necessary first to understand their restraints to studying abroad, and then to design alternative educational models that can address these challenges. The paper describes the challenges of balancing the need to create quality international learning opportunities for education students, with the limitations faced by non-traditional online adult learners who have families and full-time jobs. It is based on an action research case study of two study abroad programs implemented for online students at a northeastern four-year research-one institution of higher education.

1.2. Scholarly background on higher education, non-traditional students, and study abroad

Although many educators extol the benefits of international education in general, and study abroad in particular as a way to facilitate cross-cultural awareness and global citizenship, study abroad opportunities continue to be dominated by white, middle class females. The Institute for International Education (IIE) estimates that fewer than 36% of undergraduates who study abroad are male, and that racial and ethnic minorities account for only about 21% of the total US student population studying abroad (Obst et al., 2007). This is despite the fact that the US post-secondary student body has in fact never been so diverse in terms of age, race, ethnicity, and gender. Research also shows that students of education are among **the least likely** to study abroad, although they will be working with and shaping the future of children (Stearns, 2009).

The Institute of International Education (IIE) annual report (2007) states “to succeed in a global economy and interconnected world, U.S. students need international knowledge, intercultural communication skills, and global perspectives” (p. 6). To this end, U.S. students have been going abroad in increasing numbers. Nevertheless, students from certain groups remain underrepresented, including ethnic minorities, first generation students, and non-traditional students, despite the expansion of these populations into higher education.

In fact, as a result of the massification of higher education in the United States, the proportion of White college students in the United States has declined between 1990 and 2009 from 78 to 62 percent, while racial and ethnic minorities have increased—Blacks from 9 to 14 percent; Hispanics from 6 to 12 percent; and Asian/Pacific Islanders from 4 to 6 percent (Snyder, 2011, 13). In addition, in 2009, 42 percent of US college-aged students were at least 25 years of age and 57 percent were female (Clothey, et al., 2012), reflecting that tertiary education in the United States is no longer the domain of an elite, traditional college aged cohort of white male students.

Much of higher education's expansion is due to new avenues of access to higher education, which were previously closed to all but the elite. Indeed, in recent years online enrollments have grown at rates far in excess of the total higher education student population. Such demand is illustrated by online enrollment growth rates between 9 and 23% percent each year from 2003 and 2011, as compared with only 2.6 percent growth of the overall higher education student population in the same period (Allen and Seamen, 2013). Furthermore, the number of students taking at least one online course has now surpassed 6 million, with at least one third of all students in U.S. higher education taking at least one online course (Allen and Seamen, 2013).

According to Aslanian and Clinefelter (2013), the typical online student in the United States is a Caucasian female, who is 35 and married. Online courses are of particular appeal to students who need more flexibility in their schedules due to time constraints, as a result of family or work responsibilities, or because of geographic limitations. Although white females are the most likely to study abroad, many of the constraints of online students are similar to those of students who are among those least likely to study abroad.

Despite a diversification of higher education in the US, Carroll (1996) notes that study in a foreign country has been historically viewed as a privilege for wealthy students, and current trends show that this has not changed much over time (IIE, 2007). Research shows that populations that continue to be underrepresented in study abroad include minority students, male students, students with certain majors, and nontraditional aged students (Stroud, 2010). Perceived barriers to studying abroad among these populations include academic, personal and financial concerns (The Forum, 2009).

Certain majors are also disproportionately represented in study abroad. Stroud (2010) notes that among 1,485,000 Bachelor's degrees conferred in the United States, the largest number of degrees was in the fields of business (318,000), social sciences and history (161,000), and education (107,000). Despite this, however, only 4% of education majors studied abroad in the 2012/13 academic year, compared with 20.4% of business majors (IIE, 2014). Furthermore, students pursuing a Master's degree are even less likely to study abroad than those who plan to pursue a Bachelor's degree or less (Stroud, 2010).

2. Method

It is within the context of a desire to develop a quality curriculum for an online international education program for non-traditional students that this study was undertaken. The paper takes an action research case study approach. Erfan and Ravin (2013) define action research in education as an "inquiry conducted by educators in their own settings in order to advance their practice and improve their students' learning" (p. 2). Thus, in the interest of improving the international learning opportunities for students enrolled in one educational program, an action research approach was

undertaken. In addition, Yin (2009) suggests that case studies are an appropriate approach for studying a complex phenomenon with a particular context. This paper is an action research case study of one curricular setting within one tertiary institution, designed to examine the ways in which an international education experience can be implemented face-to-face for online students in that context.

2.1. Site

The programs discussed in this paper, and the site for the study, are situated at a private 4-year research university located in the northeast of the United States. Thus, the educational programs offered at one tertiary institution comprise the boundaries for this case study (Yin, 2009).

2.1.1. Background to Northeast University and online programs

The face-to-face study abroad programs that are the subject of this paper were created based on demand from students enrolled in an online program in international education. The online program is based at a private comprehensive university located in the northeast of the United States. The institution has over 22,000 students and is ranked in the top 20 among largest private universities. The university is known for its experiential learning approach. For example, all undergraduates are encouraged to incorporate cooperative learning into their academic curriculum, which allows them to work for six months in a setting related to their major and receive academic credit toward graduation. All incoming freshmen students are also required to participate in service learning.

The university is also recognized for its use of academic technology. It was the first in the United States to require all incoming students to have microcomputers, and was the first major university to operate a fully wireless campus. In addition, the university has offered educational programs online since 1996, which are designed for working professionals and corporations in the U.S. and abroad. A pioneer in online education, *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked its online programs as being among the "Best" in the fields of Education, Business, Engineering, and Library Science (NE University website, 2012a).

2.1.2. International education program

The study abroad programs were developed as a curricular offering of the Master of Science in International Education (MSIE) program. The program was launched as a fully asynchronous online program in the fall of 2006 with 20 students. Since that time the student body has grown to over 100 students located on every continent except Antarctica. The program curriculum is composed of 15 3-credit courses, for a total of 45 credit hours. Each course is taught over a 10-week quarter, which leads to the completion of the degree in 24 months for students who take two courses per quarter, four quarters per year (NE University, 2012b).

The promotional materials state that the Master's of Science degree will "prepare students to work effectively with the complex global challenges, trends, and issues influencing education and learning in diverse parts of the world, including the United States" (NE University, 2012b). Because of the interests of the students majoring in this field, they began making demands for an integrated study abroad component within the first year of the program's launch. However, also *because* the program is by nature international, with a student body and instructors residing worldwide, it was difficult to conceptualize a study abroad program that would be appropriate for the population. A second issue was that the majority of the student body is comprised of non-traditional students. Most students fit the profile of typical online students and also fall within one of the underrepresented groups for study abroad: they are full-time working professionals taking online courses because they do not have time to sit through face-to-face coursework several times a week. The program's students range in age from 22 to 52, and many of them are also spouses, parents, and even grandparents, making additional demands on their time (Brack, 2010). Furthermore, the student population had presumably opted to enroll in an online program because of these demands, making the addition of a face-to-face study abroad program that would meet the needs of this student population very difficult to imagine.

2.2. Data Collection

In order to assess the feasibility of offering a study abroad program and design an appropriate curriculum for this online cohort of students, two phases of research were conducted. During phase 1, an internal analysis of the program's student body was conducted using a descriptive survey. In phase 2, a study abroad model was designed based on the responses collected during phase 1. Evaluations and interviews were then conducted after the study abroad program was implemented, in order to assess the success of the model and modify it as needed.

2.2.1. Phase 1

In January 2010, an online descriptive survey was used to gather demographics and information about participants' interest in and availability or restraints for a study abroad program. The voluntary and anonymous web-based survey was distributed to 120 current students and alumni from the MSIE program via emails sent by the program manager. The survey was created and posted on the School of Education's Survey System as part of one student's final capstone research project (Brack, 2010).

2.2.2. Phase 1 Results

The Phase 1 survey produced 40 responses, achieving a total response rate of 33.3 percent (Brack, 2010). Of the 40 responses to the survey, 72.5 percent were female and 85 percent were Caucasian, which corresponds with the typical online student across the

United States. Approximately half of respondents (47.5 percent) were between the ages of 25-29; most others were older. Slightly less than half (42.5 percent) were married, and 22.5 percent had children. While all respondents indicated a desire to study abroad with the program, approximately 68 percent of respondents noted that only a short-term study abroad program of one month or less would be a possibility for them. Almost a fourth (24.33 percent) preferred a duration of only one to two weeks (Brack, 2010).

In an open-ended section of the survey, students identified barriers that would prevent them from participating in a study abroad program, revealing the time constraints and financial obstacles the majority of this population of students face. Students noted barriers such as having to make babysitting arrangements for children while abroad, getting enough time off from work, the cost of travel as well as the cost of not working while traveling, and seasonal limitations. Summer programs were noted as highly preferred by most respondents, the majority of who worked as teachers. Though other research on barriers to studying abroad indicate that financial concerns are not the top limitation for most students due to financial aid opportunities (Stroud, 2010), the survey reflected that in fact, for *these* students, time and money mattered a lot. As one respondent stated: “Not working and having to pay all of the usual bills while abroad is not easy for adult working students” (Brack, 2010). This is likely a reflection of the conflicting needs of non-traditional vs. traditional students.

2.2.3. Phase 2

The results from Phase 1 were used to help the program’s administrators to develop a study abroad program in Phase 2 that would fit within the constraints of a majority of the program’s students and their schedules. Based on the results of the Phase 1 survey, as described above, it was determined that a short-term study abroad program, comprising no more than two weeks overseas, was the best way to realistically accommodate the demand for a majority of the students, a desire for hands-on international experience advocated by NE university’s experiential learning approach, and the program’s philosophy.

Phase 2 data was collected from two international study tours with online graduate students through on-site observations, informal interviews with participants, and student program evaluations. In total there were 23 study tour participants across both international study tours. The author, as a study tour leader, was a participant observer during both study tours described in this paper. According to Merriam (2009), participant as observer may occur when the researcher’s observer activities are subordinate to the researcher’s role as participant. Careful notes were taken during the study tours about the observations and reflections that were made during the experience (Merriam, 2009), and feedback from the student participants was also recorded. Students also were asked to keep journals of their own observations throughout their experience abroad. At each study tour’s conclusion, the university’s study abroad office conducted program

evaluations to generate feedback from participants about their experience (Fitzpatrick, Christie, and Mark, 2009). The evaluation was based on a five point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) and included questions about the impact of the study tour such as “I had meaningful interactions with the local culture,” and “The study tour was informative and deepened my understanding.” Open-ended questions included, “What three items helped deepen your understanding?” and “Do you feel study abroad was a valuable addition to your educational experience?” Internal program documents and public records were also reviewed to provide additional context and validity (Yin 2009).

3. Results: Development of a short-term study abroad model

According to the Institute for International Education (IIE) (2007), recent growth in study abroad enrollment is due to study programs that offer shorter lengths of time than semester and academic year programs. More than half (approximately 56%) of U.S. students elect short-term study abroad programs (including summer, January term, and any program of less than 8 weeks), whereas semester study now accounts for only 39% of students studying abroad (IIE, 2014). However, some study abroad advocates are wary of shorter-term programs, claiming that programs of longer duration provide better opportunities for deeper immersion in the culture (IIE White Paper, 2007). In response, in 2009 the Forum on Education Abroad produced a list of nine standards of good practice for short-term education programs. These are listed below:

1. The program relates to the education abroad mission of the organization and has well-defined academic and/or experiential objectives
2. The program is reviewed in the light of its stated educational purpose for fostering student learning and development
3. The organization maintains clearly stated and publicly available policies on academic matters related to education abroad.
4. The organization maintains clearly stated policies on non-academic matters related to the educational experience abroad.
5. The program or its sponsoring institution provides advising and orientation support that is consistent with the program’s mission and the needs of its students.
6. The program maintains and makes publicly accessible, its commitment to fair and appropriate policies regarding student selection and conduct.
7. The program has adequate financial and personnel resources.
8. The program has established and continuously maintains effective health, security, and risk management policies, procedures, and faculty/staff training.
9. The program is organized in conformity with ethical principals and practices. (The Forum, 2009)

Keeping in mind The Forum standards of good practice and the MSIE program students' limitations, it was decided that a short-term study abroad program of no longer than 2 weeks in duration would be integrated with a full 3-credit course, which would be offered online. The rationale was that a short-term standalone study abroad program would have less academic value for fostering student learning and development (The Forum, Standard 2) than one which was integrated into a full academic-term experience. In addition, it was believed that integrating a mandatory short-term study abroad component into a full 3-credit course would have potential to attract more students, because participants could take the course as part of the credits needed toward their graduation. Furthermore, they would also be eligible for financial aid under the Simon Act, which allows students to use financial aid for study abroad if it is required for course credit.

3.1. Online study abroad model

The program's first course with integrated short-term study abroad was offered in the summer of 2010. The Forum Standard 3 of Good Practice, "Academic Framework," suggests that short-term study abroad programs seek "to integrate student overseas learning with requirements and learning at the students' home institutions" (The Forum, Standard 3, 2009). The Phase 1 survey also indicated that students wanted a course that was related to the program's popular secondary concentration in peace education, and that students preferred to go to Europe. Because the MSIE program also had affiliated faculty who had expertise on this topic in Northern Ireland, and who also had experience organizing study abroad programming there, the course "Peace and Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland" was designed and offered as an elective course to satisfy some requirements of the peace education secondary concentration. Coincidentally, the United Kingdom also happens to be the most popular destination for study abroad among US students (IIE, 2014).

The format design incorporated eight weeks of coursework (as opposed to a regular summer quarter at the university, which would be ten weeks). During the first four weeks, students participated in class online, during which they learned about the history and key issues of the conflict in Northern Ireland and how education has been used to instigate or address these issues. This academic foundation prepared students for meeting in person in Northern Ireland, for 8 days of on-site lectures, meetings, and visits to key sites relevant to the peace building process. Activities included lectures on integrated education in Northern Ireland, visits to the Peace Wall in Belfast, and tours of historical sites in both Belfast and Derry. During one historical walking tour of Derry, the group randomly encountered the Irish 1998 Nobel Peace Prize Winner John Hume, whom they had just read about in class the previous week. Students were then able to ask him questions in person about what they had read about him. They commented

afterwards that this was an amazing example of experiential learning that could never have happened if they had not traveled to the country they were studying. When students returned from the trip they had another two weeks of class online, during which time they reflected on the experience and completed final projects related to the course theme.

The first course and study abroad trip included eight students, 2 males and 6 females, which fortunately just met the minimum requirement for the trip to run. Three out of eight of the people in the group were minorities; one student was married and a parent. All but one student was working toward a Master's degree in International Education; one was getting a Master's degree in teacher education; all but one worked full-time and all were taking additional online courses even while abroad.

Because MSIE students are based all over the world, airfare was not included in the cost of the trip, instead, students were asked to meet their professor and program administrators at a designated date and time at the program's hostel in Belfast. It was not a surprise that students connected there from three different continents. Though the majority flew in from various points in the United States, there was also a student who came to Belfast from Mexico, and another one from India.

Although the first group was considered small in proportion to the number of students in the Master's in International Education program overall at the time, positive feedback from program participants confirmed that this model had potential to attract online students to a study abroad option. Thus, a second trip was planned the following year.

For the second study abroad program, a different three-credit course was offered, which was developed based on faculty interest and expertise. It was believed that Master's degree students who remain enrolled in the program for two years might go abroad twice if there were different opportunities each year. Therefore, a new course, "internationalization and higher education" was planned. This course included a case study component on internationalization of higher education in China. Though the course content was different, the format was the same. Students had 4 weeks of content online introducing them to the main ideas of internationalization with specific examples pertinent to China. During weeks 4 and 5 of the course, students spent ten days together face-to-face in China with their course instructor, conducting site visits to Chinese universities and educational providers. Lectures by international education professionals at study abroad programs, Chinese universities, private English language providers, and a provincial Ministry of Education were among the academic activities that were integrated into an intensive ten-day study tour.

During the second course, students also flew to the program's meeting point in Beijing from different parts of the US, as well as from Cambodia and Japan. There were 15 participants, 6 males and 9 females, 2 who were minorities, and one who was recently married and a parent. In addition to the group having doubled from the previous year,

another interesting difference in the composition of the student body was that a significant number of students from other education programs besides international education also enrolled in the course as an elective. Though the International Education students had been the target audience, there were also 5 students from the Master's program in Higher Education, and one teacher education major in the group. This result suggested that with an appropriate course theme, students from many education majors might be attracted to the course. This is worthy of consideration especially when planning appropriate study abroad programming for pre-service teachers.

Also noteworthy was that gender was more evenly balanced for the China trip than it had been for the trip to Northern Ireland. This is despite the fact that, as is typical for online programs, a large majority of students in both the International Education *and* the Higher Education programs are female. In fact, according to a 2012 internal study, the university's higher education program is 62% white and 73% female ("Who We Are," 2012).

4. Program results and discussion

Feedback from both post-trip evaluations was positive. All students indicated that their learning had been greatly enhanced by the study abroad portion of the course. Benefits of the study abroad portion of the course identified by students included that they were able to: meet living history, better understand the context by interacting with local people, network with professionals in the field, and strengthen their resume. An added bonus of study abroad for the online population was that they could interact face-to-face with their classmates and professors; few of them had ever met prior to the study abroad excursion.

The change in gender imbalance between the Northern Ireland and China trips warrants a closer examination. As discussed, much of the study abroad literature indicates that a gender imbalance exists in study abroad. However, study abroad in China tends to be an exception. Men are far more likely to study abroad, and the gender ratio is closer to 50/50 than in any other host country (Brandauer, Freyhof, and Riley, 2011). Feedback from American men who study in China typically emphasizes practicality and career considerations for going there (Brandauer, et al., 2011). This would be a reasonable assumption in the case described here, as well, given that a larger proportion of higher education students participated in the second trip to China than the first trip to Northern Ireland. As Chinese students make up the bulk of international students on US college campuses now, more higher education professionals are finding it necessary to have knowledge of Chinese culture. However, none of the feedback on the program evaluation specifically identified a professional need to go to China or even a particular interest in China as a reason for participating in the trip. In fact, the stated

reasons for participating in the trip to China were similar to those identified by the students who had traveled to Northern Ireland. They included: wanting to experience another culture, and desiring a learning experience outside the online environment. Those who had traveled to China and did indicate the influence of career in their decision to study abroad stated they wanted to study abroad because they wanted to *work in* study abroad. It is therefore difficult based on participant feedback to speculate whether the study abroad location impacted the gender balance. Future planned summer short-term study abroad trips that will be offered through the School of Education will be to Ghana and to Vietnam; it therefore may be possible to examine whether location impacts the gender balance of short term study abroad more longitudinally.

The second area where it is difficult to assess the success is in recruiting minority students. The proportion of minority students was low, especially to China. However, given that the School of Education's online programs' minority population is also proportionately low, the minority population on both trips was representative. It should be noted that all of the minority students who participated in either trip had been abroad more than once before traveling with the programs described here.

In contrast, there were Caucasian students on both trips who had never before traveled abroad. Three of the students who traveled to China had never left the United States, and one of these three also had extremely limited experience outside of her home state prior to the trip.

Lastly, although 22.5% of the respondents in the MSIE program internal review conducted in Phase 1 were parents, only one parent participated in each of the two study abroad programs discussed in this paper, which is not a proportionate representation. Nevertheless, given that childcare was identified as one of the main constraints against studying abroad for this online student population, this too is not a surprise. However, perhaps it is significant that there were any parents at all.

5. Lessons learned and conclusion

According to Wheeler (2000), while enrollments in study abroad programs are increasing, stays abroad are growing shorter. In the past, short-term study abroad programs were considered undemanding and not valuable, but recent studies have shown that students who participated in short-term study abroad programs gained the same personal and intellectual growth as that which was attained from those who participated in traditional long-term study abroad programs. For online students who wish to have the experience of studying abroad and getting a taste of another culture but perhaps do not have the time, money, or resources to complete a traditional semester or year abroad, short-term programs are ideal.

Similarly, program evaluations indicated that program participants also gained a great deal from their short-term stay abroad. Embedding the program within the context of a larger 3-credit online course ensured that students were able to maximize their short time abroad and gain a meaningful experience. Hands on learning about the subjects they were studying in their online coursework, as well as the opportunity for face-to-face interaction added to the learning experience. Furthermore, the format of the program attracted students who would not be able to study abroad in a more traditional academic format because of time or financial constraints, including older and part-time students, and parents. The short-term embedded experience proved to be the only way to provide this group of non-traditional online students a study abroad experience.

Though this action research case study discusses an experience with only two short-term study abroad programs within one University's School of Education online programs, these cases revealed that the short term study abroad curriculum model embedded into a full-term online course worked well for the target population. However, several questions remain and warrant further investigation. Among them are:

1. Could the same model be successful for other populations?
2. Could such a model attract underrepresented populations to study abroad within the undergraduate population?
3. What else can be done to attract underrepresented populations to study abroad?
4. Can face-to-face study abroad be required for online students in an international education program, and if not, how can the cultural exchange aspect be facilitated online?

The examples discussed here demonstrate that with proper planning, study abroad can be a viable option for non-traditional online student populations. As the US student population continues to become more diverse, education models and curriculum must change and respond to adapt to the changing student needs. If study abroad programs especially designed for target populations are more widely implemented, even students (such as the education students discussed in this paper) who face great obstacles can and should go abroad. However, for those students for whom a face-to-face learning abroad experience will remain impossible, online programs should maximize their potential for learning at a distance to provide high quality virtual cultural exchanges.

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