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

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

Instructor-Led Programs

1.0 Epistemic Learning

1.1 Recognizing learning styles and techniques - hands-on, lecture, experiential, online.
1.2 Learning that learning is important - beliefs, personal identity, self-efficacy.
1.3 Learning that learning has a context - multiple perspectives, intercultural competence.
1.4 Learning that learning is a process - reflective practice, continuous improvement.
1.5 Learning that learning is a result of disorientation - “getting out of the box”.
1.6 Learning as a result of seeing life’s importance.

2.0 Relational Learning

2.1 Recognizing the juxtaposition of U.S. and African cultures.
2.2 Learning about values and beliefs.
2.3 Learning about social networks.
2.4 Learning about the South African context.

3.0 Personal Adaptive Learning

3.1 Personal adaptive learning.
3.2 Personal adaptive learning.
3.3 Personal adaptive learning.
3.4 Personal adaptive learning.

4.0 Philosophical Learning

4.1 Philosophical learning.
4.2 Philosophical learning.
4.3 Philosophical learning.
4.4 Philosophical learning.

5.0 Useful Skills and Attitudes

5.1 Useful skills and attitudes.
5.2 Useful skills and attitudes.
5.3 Useful skills and attitudes.
5.4 Useful skills and attitudes.

Findings

Instructor-Led Subject/Focused Programs:

1. Epistemic Learning - 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.

2. Relational Learning - 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.

3. Personal Adaptive Learning - 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.

4. Philosophical Learning - 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.

5. Useful Skills and Attitudes - 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.

Bailey Scholars Research Team

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