

Lessons Learned from Implementing an Intercultural Communication Training Program for Pre-Departure Expatriates

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Abstract

Expatriate preparation is an ever growing area of interest in a globalized economy sharing a globalized workforce. For decades, scholars have sought methods for best preparing expatriates for host culture experiences. Research has revealed an array of factors leading to intercultural readiness success which has led to the creation of various assessments and training programs. Many of these programs offer strong returns on investment for governmental, private, and missions organizations that regularly send people abroad. However, even in the presence of research-based expatriate preparation programs, the expatriate failure rate still reaches nearly 65 percent. There seems to be a disconnect between even a high quality expatriate preparation program and the corresponding experience, revealing that even the best programs can fail to adequately prepare expatriates for an abroad experience. After a decade of studying and teaching intercultural communication, plus years of training pre-departure expatriates, the author offers a culmination of insight into potential issues that can arise in providing effective intercultural readiness training. Following examinations into the areas of trainee accountability, time required for growth, and trust between trainer and trainee, suggestions are provided for the implementation of an international travel preparation program that produces expatriates ready to face the challenges of life abroad.

Keywords: Expatriate preparation; intercultural communication readiness and assessment

Seeking and preparing globally adept expatriates continues to be a challenge for both intercultural communication scholars and private, public, and non-profit practitioners. Decades of research and practice have led scholars to develop a vast array of scales aimed at assisting organizations in selecting the right candidate for expatriate work. Across the U.S., colleges and universities offer undergraduate and graduate programs in global awareness, taking to heart a National Education Association (2012, p. 5) report's claim that "if today's students want to compete in this global society, ... they must also be proficient communicators."

Colleges, universities, researchers, and private entities are therefore staged to prepare leaders in this globalizing economy (Knight, 1994; Krell, 2005; Thomas & Inkson, 2004; Yan, Zhu, & Hall, 2002) and research continues to expand our understanding of what it takes to improve intercultural communication competence (Arasaratnam, 2015; Jackson, 2015; Martin, 2015; Kim, 2015).

Despite the initiatives toward global education and expatriate preparation in post-secondary education and professional consulting firms, reports indicate student deficiencies in global awareness and preparedness (American Council on Education, 2000; Siaya & Hayward, 2001). While more than 80 percent of private and public, for-profit as well as non-profit, organizations send employees abroad for assignments, making investments of \$300,000 to \$1,000,000 in each expatriate (Black & Gregersen, 1999), there remains an expatriate attrition rate of up to 65 percent across for-profit business sectors (Dodd, 2007; Harris, Moran, & Moran, 2004). This extraordinary rate of failure can be traced to a variety of sources, and it is not the purpose of this paper to pinpoint any one source. Instead, this paper seeks to reveal recurring themes associated with expatriate failure related to the pre-departure training process, as gleaned from the author's decade of studying and teaching intercultural communication, as well as years of training pre-departure expatriates.

A direct correlation between strong research and training programs and the outcome of well prepared and successful expatriate candidates is lacking. Proficient intercultural communication effectiveness training is essential in developing expatriate intercultural communication competence (Seidel, 1981). The process of preparing candidates for expatriate success can take many forms (Abe, 1980), including training that focuses on both intercultural behavior and communication (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Gardner, 1952; Hammer *et al.*, 1978; Nishida, 1985; Ruben, 1976; Ruben and Kealey, 1979; Guthrie, 1975; Pedersen, 1983; Triandis, 1980; Wallace and Atkins, 1961; Chen, 1989; Bochner and Kelly, 1974; Cupach and Imahori, 1993).

While there exist many available and reliable research-based expatriate assessments and training programs (i.e. Peterson's Cultural Awareness Test & Tucker's Survey of Expatriate Training and Development), there must be an existing disconnect among the assessment, training, and departure/experiences to account for such a high rate of failure. Given this disconnect, a discussion regarding effective training practices seems in order. Therefore, it is to address this gap that this paper seeks to offer experienced insight and advice regarding potential issues that can arise in providing effective intercultural readiness training. Webster (2015) defines *expatriate* as one who lives outside his or her home country and/or denounces patriotism to this home country. However, this paper will utilize Vance's (2005) definition of *expatriate* as anyone who travels outside his or her home culture, and this term is used most commonly herein in reference to short-term missionaries traveling abroad.

Dodd's (2007; 2013) Go Culture Assessment (GCA) and corresponding training modules are the expatriate readiness tools I typically use when training pre-departure candidates. Administered as an online pre and posttest through a pass code system, the GCA has been used in studies with expatriates and students going to 30 countries. The Cronbach reliability is 0.92 and the predictive validity across 12 studies ranges from multiple correlations of .62 to .86 (Dodd, 2007; Velten, J. (2015). As indicated above, the GCA has been tested in numerous research studies (30 countries and 3,000 participants) (also see Dodd, Winegeart, & Lytle 2008; Hooker & Dodd, 2009; Dodd, 2010; Dodd, 2012; Velten, J. & Dodd, C.H. (2015). This paper is not intended to promote any commercial product. Instead, the above reliability data for the GCA

is provided to show that no matter how effective the research-based expatriate assessment, if the training is not conducted proficiently, the opportunity to enhance trainee experiences abroad can sometimes be lost.

Among the various research-based expatriate assessment and training programs, including the GCA, there are challenges in the implementation process due to a number of factors including funding, scheduling, optimal learning environments and perceptions of trainees regarding the importance of pre-departure training. The three overarching challenges that seem to affect program outcomes the most are: trainee accountability, amount of time in training, and the level of trust between trainer and trainee. In the remainder of the manuscript, I will discuss these issues, offer examples, and provide possible solutions to help minimize these challenges.

Expatriate Pre-Departure Training Challenges and Solutions

When implementing a program designed to prepare expatriates for host culture experiences, trainers want to first select the research-based assessment and training module that is most relevant to the particular context of the experience at hand (i.e. missions, business, foreign affairs). Such programs are designed to assist sending organizations with tools for selecting and/or preparing the best candidates for experiences abroad. If administered correctly, these programs can yield dividends for both the sending organization and the expatriate (Black & Gregersen, 1999; Shay & Tracey, 1997). There seem, however, to be recurring themes regarding the success of such programs that is unrelated to the quality of the program itself. Instead, the simple factors noted above, as enacted during training, seem to influence the success rate of an expatriate preparation program. Below is an explanation of these three factors, examples, and suggestions on how to prepare and adjust for these challenges. To maintain confidentiality, all names have been changed.

Challenge #1: Trainee Accountability

One might assume that all who register for expatriate preparation training would come fully prepared to engage in the process of learning and implementing new skill sets. Surprisingly, this is not always the case. Even in situations where the trainee expresses a strong interest in the abroad experience, full interest in a preparatory program and confidence in its legitimacy is not a guarantee.

For example, Jennifer was an upper-division student at a prestigious private university in the southwestern United States who planned to participate in a six-week Christian mission effort in a Latin American country. She placed well in many of the GCA factor areas, but her pre-test revealed particular growth areas that the trainers began addressing in our first of three one-on-one training sessions over the course of a semester. It became troublingly evident to me upon our first interaction, through her verbal and nonverbal communication, that she assumed there was nothing I could teach her; possibly due to her lack of confidence in such preparation programs,

her lack of confidence in me as the trainer, or perhaps the simple assumption that, at 21 years of age, she had garnered enough life experience to warrant an easy transition to any host culture.

Nonetheless, each time we met, we discussed her growth areas, including possible reasons for lower scores in particular factors leading to intercultural communication success. We also talked about tangible steps she could take to help her become more ready for departure regarding these growth areas. She sat and listened, slumped in her chair with her arms crossed. Weeks passed between our sessions, but I reached out to her via email to confirm her efforts in reaching goals we had set, to which she never replied.

Not surprisingly, each time we met and I asked how she was performing regarding her strategy of improvement, she shrugged and said she had not got around to it. This model persisted up until her time of departure. To be specific, both her pre-immersion test and post-immersion test revealed a likelihood of intercultural challenges in working with authority figures, especially males.

Through her disclosures, she revealed that this was a challenge for her, which was already somewhat evident in the way she seemed to disregard the things I was telling her. Her lack of interest in the intercultural readiness training persisted, her deadline for departure growing closer and closer while she showed little improvement in her potential level of success in a male-dominated culture.

Unsurprisingly, post-hoc third party analysis completed by her international host revealed significant issues related to her willingness to follow instructions and cultural norms, especially when those directions came from men. She was assigned the role of working with a youth group while living with the youth minister and his family. His comments revealed that she became romantically involved with an older gentleman who sometimes helped out with the youth group. Due to this man's undesirable past, the youth minister asked Jennifer to refrain from showing affection to this man while with the youth group due to cultural expectations and the negative influence it might have on the young adults. Jennifer disregarded his request and became upset that he would even make such a suggestion.

These types of situations are probably more common than we realize, but in this case, there was clear evidence, based on the pre-test and post-test assessments, that this student was going to struggle within a specific aspect of life abroad. After hours of training and reaffirmation of skills-development, she refrained from putting in the effort to improve her likelihood of success. It is evident from this case that Jennifer felt no obligation to take the training seriously, but Jennifer's is not an isolated case.

Brooke also planned to conduct Christian mission work in a Latin American country and completed the same one-on-one sessions as Jennifer. However, Brooke confirmed her pre-test concern that she had great uncertainty and anxiety about what was to be expected of her while abroad. Starting with our first training session, in an effort to help ease this tension and help her prepare for the abroad experience, I recommended she contact her international host and ask about her expected responsibilities. Session after session, she would confess that she had not contacted the host and ultimately went, unprepared, into what would become a horrible

experience for her. Soon after meeting her international host, she learned that her role would be to work in the city alleys on a daily basis, talking to the young female prostitutes and drug addicts. This came as a complete shock and greatly disturbed this unprepared expatriate, leading her to have unforgettable negative experiences. Had she contacted the host prior to departure, she could have learned of her potential responsibility and either prepared for it or asked for another assignment.

In both of these cases, the pre and posttest assessment was sound and the training offered was research based, but due to the trainees' lack of accountability during the training, their experiences abroad were negative. Herein, we see that a strong, research based assessment and corresponding training module do not automatically equal a successful expatriate experience, but that the trainee must be fully engaged in the training process to garner the greatest benefit.

To increase trainee accountability, I began requiring each trainee I work with to maintain a journal documenting his or her specific areas of growth, notes related to these areas from our discussions, a plan of action to improve post-test scores in these areas, and an accounting of what the trainee actually did to improve training. Regular review of these journals by the trainer encourages trainees to maintain records of the directions they have followed, and it increases the likelihood that they will act when provided with sound pre-departure advice. A second suggestion to increase trainee accountability can work especially well in a professional consulting situation where the trainer is paid to provide expatriate pre-departure training: the collection of an additional deposit from trainees or their funding organization (i.e. place of employment) that will be returned upon the successful completion of the training program can drive trainees to fulfill requests more readily.

Challenge #2: Amount of Time in Training

The second challenge that has been continually evident in pre-departure training lies in the amount of time allotted to affect change. Intercultural readiness requires hours and hours of assessment, self-reflection, training, and real effort on the part of the trainee. It remains to be seen just how many hours of training are required to affect sufficient levels of change in a person's ability to thrive in a host culture, but from my experience, expatriates often wait until the last few months prior to departure to begin preparations, which often simply does not leave them long enough to prepare effectively.

There is wide variation in terms of accepted wisdom and training recommendations for how much time is enough. The commonly allotted three months of pre-departure preparation falls well below Colgate-Palmolive's widely successful expatriate readiness program recommendation of six to eighteen months prior to departure (Black & Gregersen, 1999). Some skills development processes take up to 40 hours of face-to-face training, which does not include out-of-class time where learned skills are practiced or tasks are performed to increase function or task readiness (Allington, 2011). TED Talk speaker and author Josh Kaufman (2013) claims optimistically that any new skill can be learned in only 20 hours, while for decades people have

accepted the common rule that it takes ten thousand hours to completely master a new skill (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Gladwell, 2008).

This wide variance in expectations regarding time allotted to training should lead intercultural communication scholars to test how much preparation time is required for most pre-departure expatriates to garner the necessary skills to perform proficiently in a host culture. As such a test has not yet been created or conducted., it is from my experience that I claim that a preparation term of a few months, involving three to five individual or group sessions and a common preparation model, is simply not enough time to affect substantive intercultural readiness. Below, I provide a few examples as evidence to substantiate this claim.

Nate was a 20-year-old college senior at a prestigious private university. He successfully completed nearly three years of college away from his parents and chose to participate in a Honduran summer mission. Nate's GCA pretest revealed many areas of strength, but a few troubling growth areas, including a very low score in his family accommodation. After our initial conversation regarding his results, Nate revealed he felt confident in his ability to perform well in this expatriate experience, but that his step-mother was manipulating him and his father in an effort to keep Nate from going abroad. He went on to explain that ever since his dad had married this woman, she had been verbally abusive to him and his siblings and that her presence still weighed heavily on him as an adult.

In situations such as this, I am always quick to remind trainees that I am not a counselor. It is important in intercultural readiness training to not step outside the roles of educators and scholars to provide counseling advice, even when we think we have a great idea to share. Instead, our role is to advise counseling as a method of alleviating whatever pressure that, if not properly addressed, may greatly increase an expatriate's likelihood of intercultural failure. With his permission, I helped Nate get set up at the university counseling center for a trial session.

At our next appointed time to meet, Nate came with a much more positive outlook on his summer missions situation. His counselor had provided him some great tools to reevaluate his relationship with his step-mother and communicate more effectively with her regarding his goals. She began to support Nate's goal, and the next step was to invite her to campus for a group counseling session. Things were going well, but the end of the semester was drawing close and the time for Nate to travel to Honduras was fast approaching. Nate failed to attend our last training session, and I was unable to reach him for quite some time, but soon learned from the international host in Honduras that Nate had never arrived. Months later Nate communicated via email that his step-mother had relapsed into a position of verbal abuse and laying guilt on Nate for wanting to go, leading him to abandon his ambitions to travel abroad.

Other examples of time-constraint in pre-departure intercultural communication training include assisting candidates in: becoming less rigid in their time orientation (helping candidates become more flexible in their daily routines through less reliance on a daily planner), becoming more socially accepting of others (showing candidates that they can initiate and maintain a relationship with someone much different than themselves), helping family members reframe the way they think of dangerous mission work (for example, serving sex-trafficking victims in Eastern

Europe), generating situations that boost his or her confidence in successfully navigating the newness of an abroad experience (providing scenarios for candidates that help them grow more sure of their abilities), and other family-related issues related to financial connectedness and responsibility, to name a few. Some candidates make substantive strides toward positive adjustments in pre-departure deficits, yet fail to experience the host culture. I am convinced that if given enough time, many candidates for expatriate experiences would garner greater short and long-term results while in the host culture. It is, therefore, paramount that intercultural readiness trainers appreciate the extended amounts of time that might be needed to truly prepare expatriates for separation from their home and acculturation into a host culture.

Challenge #3: Level of Trust between Trainer and Trainee

The third and final challenge this paper aims to address is the level of trust between the trainer and trainee. Decades of research regarding the importance of the interpersonal relationship between counselor and client have been affirmed by Lambert and Barley (2001), noting that the relationship factor is the most important aspect in affecting positive outcomes for clients. Similarly, it is essential that intercultural trainers and trainees develop a relationship of trust in order to increase the likelihood of trainee receptiveness and overall intercultural readiness and success abroad. There have been cases in my experience wherein I knew that if I had a better relationship with a trainee, that his or her outcome would have been more positive.

For example, while providing pre-departure training for a group of upper-division missions students in one-on-one sessions, half of the missions class was randomly assigned to me for additional training while the other half received only the course preparation. The course was taught by two seasoned missionaries who had traveled extensively and had years of experience performing missions at various locations abroad. It became apparent that students were drawn more to their instructors' directions than to the research-based training module I offered. At first, this frustrated me, but soon I accepted the reality that these students had no prior experience with me and only met with me a handful of times, so of course it made sense if they would place more trust in the information gleaned through their stronger relationship.

To these students, I was merely a researcher who wanted to assess them, offer tips, and then assess them again. Because of our lack of interpersonal relationship building, these students were much more likely, according to Lambert and Barley, to trust and follow the instructions of the teachers whom they meet multiple times weekly and trusted. In many of these cases, based on their low pre-test GCA score in task experience, students expressed concerns of uncertainty regarding the ambiguity of their tasks in the host culture. No matter how many times I recommended contacting their hosts to learn more about their expected responsibilities, though, the students did not do so until one of the class instructors made the same suggestion.

Ian, as one example, was an international student who felt overly confident in his ability to travel and thrive in host cultures due to his past travel experiences. He was uncertain about what was to be expected of him while in the host culture, and this uncertainty led to heightened anxiety during the pre-departure stages. In an effort to help him feel better equipped for the

experience, I advised him to contact his international host, yet session after session he provided reasons as to why he had not gotten around to making this contact. Subsequently, his anxiety persisted until the missions' instructors advised the same course of action. Due to his relationship with and trust of these two individuals, he quickly contacted his international host and began to feel better, even excited, about what was going to be his responsibility while in the host culture.

Ian is just one of many examples from my experience in training expatriates for intercultural experiences where trainees can be seen reasonably lacking confidence in research-based programs, provided by a stranger, while they accept and act upon suggestions of trusted professors and mentors. In training for expatriate experiences, trainees seem to echo Lambert and Barley's understanding of the importance of interpersonal relationship in the trainer-trainee roles. However, it is not always logically possible for the intercultural readiness trainer to be someone whom all trainees know, respect, and trust prior to the training process.

Therefore, we must find expedited ways of bridging this interpersonal relationship gap so as to foster an environment in which trainees will be quick to listen and follow instructions. Suggestions on how to build this rapport as an outsider are for the trainer to discuss his or her professional experience in the field, past travel experience, training experience and success stories, and mention his or her level of education and research related to the subject matter. Another method of creating an optimal learning atmosphere, where candidate learning is likely to increase, is to use teacher immediacy behaviors. Knowing the candidate's name and providing other welcoming verbal and nonverbal communication patterns can greatly increase a candidate's learning (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001) and decrease their levels of anxiety (Velten, 2012) with the trainer. Whatever specific tactics are chosen, it seems imperative that practitioners work purposefully to build rapport with trainees prior to the actual training process if we want to capture the greatest return on pre-departure training investments.

Summary and Recommendations for Practice

Evidence points to the substantive positive changes in expatriate preparedness due to participation in a legitimate, research-based pre-departure training program (see Dodd, Lytle, & Winegeart, 2008. Velten, J. (2015); Velten, J. & Dodd, C.H. (2015). Years of experience in training expatriates for host cultures experiences have shown me that intercultural communication readiness programs are only as good as their implementation. It is apparent that successful implementation must include measures to ensure trainee accountability, a sufficient amount of time for the satisfactory resolution of pre-departure issues, and an opportunity to develop a relationship of trust between the trainer and trainee. My experiential knowledge in these areas comes from years of making the same mistakes until I realized that I was seeing recurring issues hinder the process of expatriate preparation. Through the implementation of trainee journals, allotting ample time to affect change, and working to develop rapport between trainer and trainee, I have begun seeing improved results, and predict that other practitioners will

likewise begin to better enjoy the fruits of their dedicated efforts to improve expatriate experiences.

For example, I now offer expatriate training as a part of an upper-division Intercultural Communication course at the university where I teach. Some, but not all, of these students know me prior to their enrollment in the course, yet I utilize weekly class meetings to increase interpersonal bonds that allow me to more effectively reach these students who are just getting to know me. This longer-term interpersonal interaction should increase the amount of trust students place in me as their teacher, but further research is needed to discover any correlation between teacher-student relationship and the effectiveness of expatriate training. Such tactics, coupled with a strong, research-based intercultural readiness assessment and training program, should assist in the implementation of a successful expatriate preparation program.

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