

The Seduction of Study Abroad Experiences

Three University Educators' Search for Personal & Professional Meaning

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Introduction

There's a flight of imagination about the kinds of experiences people dream of when embarking on a study abroad trip. As travelers, we leave from the security and stability of a familiar place and willingly travel afar "to seek out a change of scenery and feel a sense of enchantment, to learn about the lives of strangers, and to give [ourselves] a chance to be someone [we] can't be at home" (Behar, 2013, p. 5).

Currently considered high-impact practices in higher education (McMahan, 2008), these experiences (often led by faculty) are defined as a temporary predefined educational sojourn (Hulstrand, 2009; Kinginger, 2009) for students who "physically leave their home countries to engage in college study, cultural interaction, and more in the host country" (McKeown, 2009, p. 12).

Study abroad experiences have emerged as a framework that taps into experiential learning by preparing students to understand and develop their own intercultural sensitivity, cultural responsiveness, and global competencies (Bloom & Miranda, 2015; Byker & Putman, 2019). For faculty whose work is informed by a

social justice perspective, study abroad programs provide an important analytic lens to counter injustice and shape action (Harper, 2018).

It is tempting to focus on new beginnings and perspectives of the students (e.g., Beverly et al., 2016; Lassegard, 2013; Nakagawa & Payne, 2011) who participate in study abroad programs. However, if we focus solely on the experiences of students, faculty experiences become a footnote, and only when repeated in collective memory or in personal consciousness. As such, this article presents a subtle yet powerful examination of the ways in which three university educators *name, construct, and eventually question* the use of study abroad as a tool to cultivate, prepare, and socialize preservice and in-service educators.

While diverse in discipline (educational administration, special education, and early childhood), teaching methods, and approach, we share broader cultural and societal concerns as well as a fascination to travel afar. Drawing together our study abroad experiences, informed by our positionality as middle-aged, White women, and our attention to understanding how our positionality informs how we approach equity and fairness in our teaching, we offer an article utilizing a *Bildung*-oriented theoretical frame, based on a reflective and critical discourse of study abroad experiences from our perspectives as faculty.

While there is no exact English translation of *Bildung* (Vásquez-Levy, 2002), some have translated it as "liberal education" (Løvlie & Standish, 2002), and others situate it closely with the concept of "citizenship" (Elmose &

Roth, 2005). Fuhr et al. (2017) explained *Bildung* as follows:

Learning is conceptualized not only as the acquisition of knowledge but also the transformation of existing knowledge structures; and these transformations are not merely cognitive, but involve transformations of the learner's personality, feelings, and relationships to others. (p. ix)

Vásquez-Levy (2002) defined it in the following way:

Bildung is the process of developing critical consciousness and of character-formation, self-discovery, knowledge in the form of contemplation or insight, an engagement with questions of truth, value and meaning. (pp. 118–119)

In this article, we use Bleicher's (2006) conceptualization of *Bildung* as a very individual and never-ending process of critically assessing knowledge as we seek to recast the boundaries of a study abroad experience to include it as a high-impact, transformative exercise for faculty. We used autoethnography and personal narratives (Denzin, Lincoln, & Rolling, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006) as our mode of inquiry, in which we lay bare the authentic and genuine examination of our lived experiences. Getting to know the details of our individual study abroad experiences allowed us to frame and re/frame our own dreams, dilemmas, and choices.

Setting and Name

Our teaching and learning study abroad program was part of a larger initiative that established a partnership

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between a large university system in the south central United States; a private educational and research center located in central Mexico; Mexican local, state, and national governmental officials and agencies; private citizens; and businesses (hereinafter referred as the Collaborative).

A memorandum of understanding was established within the Collaborative committing the university system for five years to provide a study abroad opportunity in Mexico for students enrolled in various system universities. Specifically, the Collaborative was created to afford clinical and service opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to interact with a small rural and remote community (approximately 1,000 people) located in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico.

Each summer, for eight weeks (late May through early August), faculty and students from participating system universities were charged with developing and delivering one week of educational activities for the elementary school children in the host community. Once in Mexico, university students and faculty participated in seminars (e.g., archeological, Mexican Muralist Movement) followed by learning excursions (e.g., Guanajuato mines, Santuario de Atotonilco, and Cañada de la Virgen Pyramids) to advance their cultural knowledge and understanding of central Mexico.

Our Program: Teaching and Learning in Mexico

In summer 2018, the second and third authors led a group of nine scholars (four undergraduates, four graduates, and the first author, who participated as a non-degree-seeking graduate student) in the study abroad experience. Our scholars immersed themselves in Mexican culture while engaging as both teacher and leader in a multidisciplinary summer enrichment program for elementary students during the morning hours. In the afternoon, the scholars would provide English as a second language (ESL) instruction to the employees (many of whom were parents or extended family of the children participating in the morning program) of the educational and research center.

Based on guidelines provided by the Collaborative, six teaching stations were established (art, read-aloud/shared reading, word work, interactive/shared writing, mathematics, and scientific investigation). Each day began with

music and movement activities with the entire group; the children then rotated in smaller groups through two teaching stations, and a second large-group music and movement activity closed out the session. Two adults were assigned to each station, and so, while not originally intended, the faculty leading the study abroad found themselves teaching alongside their nine university students.

In summer 2019, all three faculty members (first, second, and third authors) led a similar program. However, enrollment for the study abroad program in 2019 increased, thus allowing faculty to engage fully in supervising the university students as they provided instruction to the children.

Another change occurred in the curriculum. Unlike in 2018, a decision was made to thematically anchor the 2019 station curricula on a well-known Mexican folktale. Prior to our scheduled week in Mexico, the university students were grouped into pairs to develop and organize learning activities for one of the stations and then as a whole group co-developed and delivered two common lessons for the opening and closing of the week. Two doctoral students served as instructional leaders and coaches.

The opening and closing activities included large-group music and movement, as in the previous summer. Faculty members offered suggestions for these activities but allowed students to experience the reality of teaching in a novel context and perhaps the necessity of immediately modifying a lesson plan that was not working as originally intended.

University Student Activities: Critical Reflective Practices

From a social justice reference, we as university educators construct meaning and make choices amid the complexity of designing instruction that facilitates our scholars' ability to integrate, transfer, and apply learning acquired in one setting to lived experiences in another (Hunter, 1971). We recognize that our role is to foster critical thinking and facilitate critical reflection (Freese, 2006; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Schön, 1987). Thus we designed activities structured to maximize student and faculty interaction and engagement in critical reflective practices concerned with place, culture, language, power, and privilege.

The first author, teaching a special topics course to doctoral students, assigned an activity titled "Journaling Across/Within Culture." Prior to travel,

students became familiar with Mexico from historical, artistic, educational, and economic perspectives. Once in Mexico, students participated in the aforementioned seminars and learning excursions. Then, through journaling, they bridged what they thought they knew of Mexico and its people and what they learned while in Mexico. While journal entries were organized by time, they also had to include specific focus areas of social responsibility, global competence, global civic engagement, and leadership self-concept and self-efficacy structured around expressions, impressions, and narratives.

The second author required her master's students in special education to collect field notes and engage in interactive dialogue to increase cultural self-awareness in order to promote provision of culturally and linguistically responsive instruction, early intervention, and special education services (Robertson et al., 2012). Prior to travel, students engaged in a variety of activities designed to explore cultural self-awareness, including development of a cultural/linguistic self-reflection poster. They were then asked to consider and reexamine the influence of their own cultural assumptions on their interactions and experiences during study abroad.

The third author required her early childhood preservice teachers to reflect daily on field experiences. Her students were asked pragmatic questions (e.g., "What English learner strategies did you *plan* to use, and which strategies did you *use*?" "What could you have done differently?") relative to their professional development as well as questions relative to cultural awareness and developing cultural competencies (e.g., "What do you know about interacting with children and adults who are English learners?" "What is your understanding of a culture that is different from your own?" "How do you feel as a visitor in an unfamiliar environment?").

Mode of Inquiry and Construct

In whose voice do we speak to facilitate our understanding of relationships and re(present) data in ways that compel us to new understandings? The mode of inquiry most highly suited to sharing our stories is autoethnography. According to Denzin et al. (2006),

Autoethnography operates within the interstices—and blurs the

boundaries—between individual reflexivity (auto), the transcript of collective human experience (-ethno), and writing as a form of inquiry (-graphy) that does not merely “write up the research but itself is the method of discovery.” (p. 27)

Ellis (2004) writes that auto-ethnography data can take many forms. Data for these personal narratives were our lived experiences, reflections, and documents produced/collected during preplanning, in-country, and upon our return. Included are personal and professional conversations, photographs, social media, and planning, development, and debriefing meetings. Our data were gained within informal spaces, sometimes created between us, and within more formal contexts, necessitated by program requirements.

Unsurprisingly, in both spaces, an openness was created in which confidential tones existed among us. Getting to know the details of our individual study abroad experiences allowed us to frame and re/frame our own dreams, dilemmas, and choices.

Analysis of the data was iterative (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and drove our own process as we began to sort out (code) and follow threads of awareness that emerged from our lived experiences (Saldaña, 2009). Multiple perspectives and understandings (Barden & Cashwell, 2014) of the data were obtained from within shared communal spaces in which faculty, university students, and the educational and research center hosts gathered together to plan instruction, debrief, laugh, cry, and share stories of fear, accomplishments, and relationships.

Viewpoints from colleagues from the Collaborative were also included over time and contributed to the constant comparative approach to our analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Points of View

Reconnecting (First Author)

I was raised in Southern California with the exception of having lived in Jakarta, Indonesia, and attended the Joint Embassy School (JES) from 1974 through 1976. At the time, 44 different nationalities were represented at the school, meaning diversity in culture and language was the norm. However, diversity fell short in terms of socioeconomic status. While poverty was pervasive within the host country, most

of the children attending JES were affluent, with their parent(s) working as United Nations staff or associated with the oil industry.

Fast-forward to 1982 and I am walking a 1,000-year-old mountain trail in Papua New Guinea with an oil company survey team. We are being escorted by a local man who was paid by the oil company in the form of a Timex watch.

In both settings, my experiences of seeing/witnessing/participating from a position of privilege can't be ignored as I work to understand conflicting constructs. My experiences anchor a sense of responsibility that requires me to question, determine, and offer ways to challenge privileged systems relative to traveling afar, my own included.

When I, a tenured associate professor, first went to study abroad, I went as a non-degree-seeking graduate student. I had attended a presentation about the Collaborative's initiative and was intrigued by the opportunity to be *a part of something big and engage with children and families beyond my community*. And truth be told, I was feeling lost. With administrative changes across program, department, college, and university, I had had a tumultuous 10 months. I was looking to reconnect my work with my heart.

Having spent the first year in the program as a student and the following year as faculty, I found myself in a unique identity position. As a student, I considered myself constantly working to liberate myself from the constraints of my professional work and just to be present in my surroundings and take in the joy of being a student again.

The excitement I felt of having committed to enhancing the educational experiences of children in this community and belonging to a larger collective sparked a healing for me as well as a sense of hope and belief. Still, as the week went on, something stirred within me, questioning what enriching impact, if any, this initiative was having on the community and, most importantly, the children. Yet, by the last day we would see the children, these questions were tempered by the laughter and tears as we said our good-byes.

Upon our return to the United States, my identity returned to that of faculty. At the same time, I couldn't ignore the questions that took shape while I was in Mexico. For me, a simplistic view of the benefits of study abroad persists when we focus on those who are traveling.

But how do we know if our interactions with the children in Mexico are of value to them? And who gets to define value? As I prepared and engaged with my colleagues during the second trip, I couldn't help but think about systems of power when it is *our* university students who were able to do the traveling and learning across borders.

Disrupting the Privileged Seclusion (Second Author)

Having identified as a multicultural special educator for more than 30 years, I was most excited at the prospect of traveling with two colleagues and a group of university students to central Mexico to study abroad. I grew up in a predominantly White, middle-class community where my early exposure to individuals of color was limited to interactions with those employed by my family prior to attending a racially and ethnically diverse junior high school.

As a young special education teacher, I worked in a predominantly Latinx community, where I became increasingly aware of the disproportionate representation of students of color and English learners in special education. This led me to begin the exploration of language, culture, power, and privilege that has guided my professional journey.

While not bilingual, I have a fairly strong background in ESL and felt that this would be an opportunity for personal and professional growth for all involved—including me. I was most excited that our university students, several of whom identified as Latinx and some of whom spoke Spanish, would be immersed in an environment where the culture was distinctly different from their own. Past teaching experience has taught me that educators only begin to understand the impact of cultural differences on teaching and learning when given the opportunity to experience being “the other.”

The original plan was for the university students (along with the first author, who enrolled as a student) to provide instruction to a group of elementary-aged children. What I never anticipated was that, in addition to providing supervision and feedback, I would be put in a position where I, too, assumed responsibility for teaching young children.

By no design of my own, I actively engaged in collaboration and co-teaching alongside my university colleagues and students and had opportunities to reflect with them on my own practice as well as

theirs. I learned much from my peers, my students, and the children, including new teaching techniques and new strategies for intercultural communication. Mostly, though, I developed a new appreciation for practicing what I preach.

I had thrust upon me a chance to explore the impact of my own modeling for my students in the same way I expect them to model for their own. I thought about what it really takes to facilitate and guide learners as opposed to relying solely on direct instruction (something I consistently tell my students is critical for English learners in the United States). I had a chance to co-teach, something I stress each and every day but rarely have an opportunity to do. Was my model perfect? Far from it! Did I struggle at times to clearly communicate? Absolutely!

Academics are often accused of operating in a state of “privileged seclusion” in ivory towers with limited understandings of the “real world.” While I often challenge this assumption, I certainly did step away from the tower and experienced being “the other” in ways that have profoundly impacted how I view myself as multicultural special educator and how I approach my own work in the university classroom. As importantly, I have come to wonder whether it is possible to engage in experiences that profoundly impact ourselves and our students while simultaneously impacting the community that welcomes us.

Ha! The Schooling of a Veteran Educator (Third Author)

I grew up a blue-eyed blonde in the capital of the Cherokee Nation, and based upon my childhood experiences, I believed I was prepared for this new adventure in teaching. As early as second grade, I had understood that when a White teacher told a child to “look at me in the eye,” I could comply, while my friends whose surnames were Bear or Blackfox could not and would not because it was disrespectful for them to do so.

In addition, I recognized the need for respect and acceptance of local customs and stories. I knew the importance of showing respect when eating unique foods, such as kunuchi or grape cobbler. While my childhood was spent living in a town where few people looked like me and families had many distinctive practices, very seldom did I hear or see the Cherokee language. I was ready. Ha!

Like many veteran teachers (38

years), I had pretty much “been there, done that.” From opening a public preschool to serving on an international association board of directors, I had had countless educational experiences. University students and I had conducted research and had presented at numerous conferences. Working with international students had become a passion and delight, and I imagined I appreciated the things they could teach me.

Then a colleague invited me to participate in a study abroad program. I jumped at the chance to take university students to work with children in an unfamiliar school setting. After all, I had a vast wealth of knowledge and skills that *I could share* with university students and the children. Ha!

Eight months prior to participating in the project, we visited the school and village where we would be working. I knew I had so much to offer to these children and I would be able to enrich their lives and those of the university students. Ha!

When we arrived in Mexico, the students and professors spent four days getting to know each other, touring various sites, planning, and then replanning school-based activities. I was ready. Ha!

On the first day, as the van ascended the final hill to the village, the full realization of what we had taken on registered. What did I think I was doing? I can’t speak Spanish. The children can’t speak English. There was nothing I had to offer these children or the university students! I was sitting next to the van door. Perhaps I could tuck my rather large self into a ball and roll out onto the asphalt and then the van could pick up my bruised body on the return trip? Yeah, that was the answer to my excruciating fear. But we arrived at the front of the school before I opened the van door and did my best tuck-and-roll imitation. Obviously, I should not have come on this adventure.

Did we just “paint the church?” Were we merely a flash in the pan where the privileged from the United States of America just come, spend a little time with children, and then leave, feeling like they made a vast difference? Maybe. However, the experiences I had with the gentle, kind, and compassionate children in that very remote village school made me an infinitely better person and educator. The children *taught me* that I can still communicate with them even when we do not speak the same language. The children *taught me* I can

still give positive feedback even when we do not speak the same language. The children *taught me* that learning with very basic supplies can be just as joyful as learning in a well-supplied classroom. The children *taught me* how to say some kind things in a language I do not know. The children *taught me* how they could simultaneously learn and accept responsibility for their 2-year-old sibling with great compassion. The children *taught me* that I do still love the art and science of teaching. The children *taught me* that I can still “walk the walk.” *Gracias a los niños.*

Discussion and Question

What is essential here is *how* we came to understand the power of place, of people, of self, identifying each as uniquely specific and part of an enduring symbolic echo of our search for personal and professional meaning that coalesced from being engaged in a study abroad experience. Our *Bildung* required a systematic unearthing of conscientious recovery and reactivations of self-avowed motivations we had about teaching and learning.

One of the most powerful experiences we encountered was how quickly our roles and perspectives changed from teacher and researcher to learner. The conceptualizations we had about teaching began to lose specificity when we allowed ourselves to be untethered from the constraints of *who* is teaching and *who* is learning. Each of us in our own way reclaimed what it meant not to be a learner but to *being* a learner. From our experiences, we also found ourselves critiquing more our own practices and systemic issues surrounding study abroad, requiring continued reflection.

For us, even though our study abroad location was pre-arranged by others, we now recognize how we express a place abroad as “a focus of value” is defined by the attention we pay a certain place and space (Tuan, 1977, p. 139). The constructions and associations we held relating to traditional landmarks (e.g., college classrooms, textbooks, papers, tests) used to prepare culturally responsive teachers and leaders were lost within this new place.

Within our teaching and learning (occurring simultaneously), we had to pay particular attention to shifting identities that emerged from engaging in a new and different physical, cultural, and social space and place. We discovered that we must intentionally rework the

powerful demarcation between essential cultural revelations for our students and recasting the boundaries of culture and language to render a fundamental nature of study abroad as a space for re-creation and regeneration, for them and for us.

Pivoting between self as traveler and self as educator, our actions taken in this place, at the time of study abroad, became imbued with complexity and pressured into undulation. While study abroad programs remain a dominant template for faculty and students to cross borders, we believe that teaching and learning in unfamiliar environments is not simply to describe a popular notion of multiculturalism; rather, it provides a unique opportunity for individuals (ourselves included), who are positioned in different institutional, disciplinary, and lifeworld settings, to question, explore, and de/construct sociocultural and pedagogical dimensions of identity based on engagement with new landscapes full of social, political, cultural, linguistical, and historical meanings.

Moving Forward

Creating a sustainable future for study abroad as a high-impact practice requires collaboration, transparency, vision, and, in our case, reflective and responsive practice. From our experience, social location affects not only the quality of the study abroad experience but also the outcomes of program goals as they are enacted.

Providing opportunities for students from Hispanic-serving institutions (such as ours) underscores the observation, if not the critique, that study abroad remains inherently privileged. Tensions and challenges surfaced as we looked to establish practices within our own institution to eliminate barriers to inclusive participation and increased equity for our students as well as reciprocity with the host community.

As such, our recommendations include the following: (a) institutional commitment must address the rising cost of tuition coupled with the financial burden associated with study abroad; (b) consistent logistical and administrative support for experiential educational programs must function differently from traditional (lectures and laboratories) educational programs; and (c) meaningful partnerships that incorporate the self-identified needs of the host community must be established.

Last, while our reflections constitute an in-depth, probing, specialized discourse analysis, we used these reflections to push the realms of what typically constitutes study abroad as a high-impact practice for students. Our reflections provide insight into how study abroad can be leveraged as a high-impact practice for faculty transformation. This line of inquiry is largely absent from the literature, but this article may be a starting point for further research and, we hope, the establishment of using study abroad as a high-impact practice for faculty development.

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