

Chapter 14

Thoughtfully Preparing Business Students and Faculty for Study Abroad: Strategies for Making the Connection

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ABSTRACT

In the last twenty years study abroad program have grown in popularity. Study abroad experiences provide learning opportunities for participants, but these opportunities are only optimized if students are appropriately and thoughtfully prepared. Study abroad provides formal learning experiences, associated with coursework undertaken, and informal learning, related to new cultures and countries encountered. Students and the faculty who accompany them need to be sensitized to both of these opportunities. This chapter presents a context for study abroad experiences and suggests how they can provide students with a deeper appreciation of issues that are often overly abstracted in the college, particularly issues such as internationalization and globalization. It explores ways in which study abroad participants can be assisted to engage more fully with the experiences that they encounter abroad. In presenting learning and institutional strategies to help optimize study abroad, it is hoped that the chapter will be of value to business undergraduates, their faculty, and business educators.

INTRODUCTION

At the outset it is important to acknowledge something that might seem unnecessary, superfluous, or even a trite: study abroad experiences *can be and usually are exceptional learning experiences* that are potentially transformative and life-changing for those who participate in them. Such a claim raises a number of questions: What is a transformative experience? How can such experiences be recognized and encouraged? Do these transformative potentials apply only to long-term study abroad or are they also presented by short-term stays abroad? (Dirkx, Anger, Brender, Gwekwerere, & Smith, 2007; Savicki, 2008).

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These are legitimate questions, but they are also complex and defy simplistic answers. Indeed, in attempting to answer them, some still remain skeptical about the nature of the transformative realities of study abroad experiences (SAEs) and about the usefulness of the transferable knowledge associated with studying abroad (Bishop, 2013; Haynes, 2011). Nevertheless, there is a voluminous literature – from educators, researchers, and most particularly from students themselves – that supports the claim that SAEs are truly effective ways of initiating changes in personal perspectives and subject matter understanding (American Institute for Foreign Study, 2013; Di Pietro, 2013; Gopal, 2011). For some, the studies and statistics are convincing. For others, including the present author, the most compelling evidence for the value of SAEs lies in the recounted experiences and narratives of students who have themselves participated in study abroad (Starr-Glass, 2014a).

Short-term SAEs and long-term residency in foreign countries present different challenges and opportunities, but they also have a number of commonalities. Both provide learners with the opportunity to encounter and experience cultural difference. Both allow learners to make comparisons, challenge existing assumptions, and reflect on what has previously been learned. Educationally, longer stays abroad can be particularly valuable; however, longer stays abroad are also complicated by the seesaw dynamics of national culture adjustment – the immediate high of arrival fascination, the low of culture shock with feelings of introversion and isolation, and the subsequent high of cultural integration and acceptance (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). In short-term stays abroad – typically less than eight weeks – cultural adjustment can develop quickly, even if it might be relatively superficial, without the complicating factors associated with the long-term phases (Omachinski, 2013; Ritz, 2011).

Independent of the location or duration of the SAE, the very act of studying in a different cultural environment allows participants to approach academic disciplines from new perspectives. It allows them to integrate their different experiences into a more extensive and comprehensive whole. The act of involvement and immersion in new cultures also allows students to engage in patterns of informal learning that can be even more powerful than their academic ones (Hung, Lee, & Lim, 2012; Livingstone, 2000).

To provide a background framework for this chapter the first section considers the problems and paradoxes that business students and their instructors often encounter in the classroom, especially when dealing with constructs such as globalization and internationalism. These classroom explorations often fail to recognize the specificity of national difference and provide over-generalized prescriptions that breakdown in real-world global situations. The SAE provides the ideal way of breaking out of the confines of the classroom, of initiating new immersive explorations, and of making real connections between what has been learned in the academy and the real world in which students live.

The second section considers areas in business study and business education that can be expanded and made more meaningful through study abroad. It considers a strategic approach and the use of pre-visit workshops and ethnographic approaches for adding value to SAEs for students, future business educators, and accompanying faculty. Central to this section is a discussion of an active strategy of discovery and engagement that encourages all study abroad participants to appreciate the experience and to learn from it, and through it. The third section considers research initiatives that might further understanding of the study abroad, while the final section summarizes the key issues presented in the chapter and draws conclusions that will hopefully be of value to the reader and which might promote richer, more meaningful studies abroad.

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