

Chapter 8

Authentic Art and Cultural Learning Overseas: Developing Students' Global and Intercultural Competencies through a Study Abroad Program in China

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ABSTRACT

Developing the ability to adapt to local culture and to communicate with people of different ethnic backgrounds is considered an important global proficiency (or competency) for future global citizens. Menendez (2014) explained that global proficiency pertains to the decision makers of tomorrow and problem solvers of “global issues in social, political, cultural, economic and environment areas” (p. 180). By experiencing close interactions and connections with different cultures, students’ global proficiency has become one of the most important and strategic goals for most educational institutions, as well as for college graduates seeking careers in a competitive global market. In order to provide students with opportunities to experience and learn about different local cultures in an authentic way, many universities offer faculty-led study abroad programs, which have become a popular complement to regular classroom learning for students.

INTRODUCTION

In addition to traveling for personal leisure, university students can participate in study abroad programs and experience various cultures first-hand for college credit. They can immerse themselves in an authentic cultural context in which they interact directly with people and their cultures overseas.

According to Institute International Education’s (IIE) 2015 Open Doors data, the number of US students who study abroad increased by five percent in the fiscal year of 13/14, and China is the fifth leading destination for US students after UK, Italy, Spain, and France, respectively.

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Authentic Art and Cultural Learning Overseas

I have been taking Georgia State University art students, both undergraduate and graduate, to China for several years during my summer study abroad program, known as the Arts and Architecture in China Program (AACP). As we traveled in Beijing, Xi'an, Hangzhou, Zhengzhou, and Shanghai, China, my students were generally expected to walk 2 to 4 miles a day at various sites. We visited The Great Wall, imperial palaces, museums, the Terracotta Army tomb, West Lake, tea farms, temples, a Buddhist grotto, and several archeological sites. Throughout the program, the students and I traveled by plane, train, subway, taxi, and bus. They also took two three-credit courses (Chinese Art History, a lower-level course, and Museum Studies, a higher-level course), which I taught during this one-month program at our Chinese host university for two weeks Hangzhou Normal University in Hangzhou. After three years, I started to integrate technology into the program in 2015. During their stay at HNU, my students participated in several cultural enrichment classes including Chinese calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting classes taught by HNU studio art faculty members. Because HNU students were also taking my two courses, I observed the American and Chinese students interacting with each other, who shared their different cultural knowledge and experiences. I observed great change and growth in my students as a result of their participation in this study abroad program.

Faculty

I was interested in developing a faculty-led study abroad program in China during my third year of teaching at the School of Art and Design at Georgia State. However, I was neither ready nor prepared to because of my lack of program development experience. As a bi-lingual faculty member (originally from Taiwan) with a multi-cultural background, I was also seeking opportunities to develop more-in-depth knowledge for integrating a number of global issues and international perspectives into my own teaching through faculty workshops or training sessions offered by the university. Harrison (2014) confirmed that a “faculty development seminar [in global knowledge] gives a terrific boost to faculty members’ international knowledge” (p.18).

In 2012, I received a grant from the university, the Global Education Initiative (GEI), to internationalize one of my undergraduate courses, Visual Presentation and Instructional Technology. Before I implemented this course that covered global issues and content, I attended a three-day mandatory GEI training workshop, led by both senior faculty members from the university and trainers from other institutes. In doing so, I learned strategies on how to internationalize my course content and shared insights with senior faculty members who have been the experts in the field, such as using visual images for group’s critical discussion and identifying stereotypes. During these sessions, the trainers showed us videos and visual images related to international topics, sometimes with controversial issues. As trainees, we had to generate prompt questions to guide students in reading and decoding the messages embedded in them. This decoding process is very similar to what Yenawine (1985) called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), the viewing and questioning strategies that museum educators adopt for guiding museum audiences to progressively look at objects displayed in museum galleries. While the workshop trainees shared their prompts and questioning strategies, senior faculty mentors gave us feedback on how to modify them to better internationalize our course content. As Harrison (2014) explained, “It [the training seminar] is a particularly fruitful investment in faculty members who are early in their careers and who can connect with senior colleagues to gain the confidence that their home institution is engaged in their intellectual growth” (p.18).

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