

Chapter 5

The Importance of Intercultural Learning in Study Abroad

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ABSTRACT

College graduates in the 2010's will work in a world that is more globalized than ever before. Graduates need to be prepared to work with people from many parts of the world. Study abroad programs offer an ideal context in which teachers-in-training can learn about intercultural communication and different patterns of culturally-based behavior. This chapter first defines a series of key words; including culture, intercultural communication, intercultural communication competence, and intercultural learning. The chapter then provides an in-depth look at intercultural learning programs and courses developed and implemented by a variety of United States universities and study abroad organizations. Intentional, holistic, and research-driven methods of instruction are described. Suggestions and recommendations are also provided. This chapter also advocates that institutions implement cultural mentoring for faculty who lead study abroad programs.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 25 years, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world has changed significantly. The world's economic systems have become much more interconnected than ever before. Millions of people have moved outside of their home countries intentionally to seek work, education, or other opportunities while millions more have been forced to relocate due to war and conflict.

One of the many consequences of these changes is that college graduates in the 2010's and beyond will work in an increasingly globalized world and need to be prepared to work with people from many parts of the world. Teachers-in-training need to learn to engage with students and families with many differences, whether domestic or global, and to recognize cultural differences that affect their students' social, economic and familial contexts for learning. Intercultural awareness and sensitivity are important tools in PK-12 teachers' toolboxes for engaging all of their students, both inside and outside the classroom. There are strong needs for intercultural competence development, effective cross-cultural learning, and cultural mentoring throughout teacher development processes.

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Study abroad programs offer an ideal context in which teachers-in-training can potentially learn about intercultural communication and different patterns of culturally-based behavior, as long as these elements are “baked into” such programs. Unfortunately, recent research reported by Paige and Vande Berg (2012) demonstrates that study abroad students develop very little intercultural learning when programs do not intentionally address cross-cultural patterns or offer a holistic and developmentally appropriate structure in which students can enhance their cross-cultural competence and awareness. Teacher education programs can benefit from this research about the importance of cultural mentoring and reflective learning.

This chapter first defines a variety of terms that relate to culture, intercultural learning, and intercultural competence. Next, it describes a variety of ways in which various institutions have designed and implemented study abroad programs that incorporate intentional intercultural learning. These models suggest a variety of ways in which education faculty can develop their own models to adapt these ideas and principles to fit their own contexts and academic programs.

BACKGROUND

It is useful at the outset of this chapter to define several terms that will be used throughout this chapter. Dozens of definitions and descriptions of “culture” have been written over the years. R.M. Paige’s definition (2006, p. 43) was written with study abroad in mind:

Culture refers to values, beliefs, attitudes, preferences, customs, learning styles, communication styles, history/historical interpretations, achievements/accomplishments, technology, the arts, literature, etc. – the sum total of what a particular group of people has created together, share and transmit.

As this definition suggests, a culture can include any group of people who share common values, behaviors, assumptions and habits. Although certain patterns exist at the national level, many cultural patterns develop among smaller groups of people. This includes people living in the same region of a country or who share certain things in common, such as employment, education, athletic or artistic pursuits, racial or ethnic similarities, religion or religious persuasion, and even gender. In other words, when the authors talk about cultures in the plural sense, they are talking about groups of people and how they act and interact with each other, with their environment, and with other individuals in society. Paige’s definition above suggests that such groups share and transmit the unwritten rules of social behavior for individuals in those groups. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) agree, calling culture “software of the mind” and “mental programming” and asserting that “culture is learned, not innate” (p. 6). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012) describe culture as “the way in which people solve problems” (p. 8).

Intercultural communication refers to the patterns and methods by which individuals in one cultural group communicate with individuals in another group. Communication takes place through both verbal and non-verbal patterns (Hofstede, 2001; Jandt, 2010). Intercultural communication competence refers to a person’s ability to communicate effectively across cultural difference, implying an ability to recognize stated as well as unstated values, assumptions or beliefs and to adapt behavior as necessary to enhance communication and understanding. Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman (2003) define “intercultural sensitivity” as “the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences” and “intercultural competence” as “the ability to think and act in intercultural appropriate ways” (p. 422). Intercultural

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