

Chapter 7

Engaging Heads, Hands, and Hearts to Optimize Study Abroad Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter poses an innovative framework that can be utilized as a model for study abroad experiences, particularly those situated in developing countries. The model enhances a service learning structure by grounding both classroom study and related field work in the theoretical foundations of critical pedagogy, transformational learning theory, ecological systems theory and critical theory in a manner that sets the stage for success for study abroad students and in-country community members alike. The chapter concludes with a recommended plan for implementation of the framework as well as suggestions for optimizing sustainable outcomes for teachers as they begin work in classrooms of their own.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a classroom with a chalkboard, one book for every 3 to 7 students, no electricity, no desks and 100 happy, non-English speaking children sitting on the floor ready to learn. Where would you begin? What would you teach? How would you teach it? Welcome to the Malawi Study Abroad program!

Malawi is a small, developing country in sub-Saharan Africa. Often referred to as the “Warm Heart of Africa,” Malawi is about the size of Pennsylvania and one of the poorest, least developed and most densely populated countries in Africa. Despite daily struggles with health, nutrition, and employment, Malawians are warm-hearted, welcoming people full of joy and generosity. Good, quality education is often viewed as an avenue to reduce extreme poverty and hunger, particularly in less developed countries such as Malawi. Free primary education was established there in 1994.

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Teacher-education focused study abroad in Malawi has opened the doors for a dynamic and growing relationship between a rural primary school in Malawi and a mid-sized teaching university in the United States. The study abroad program serves as the “link” between the two educational communities. For the last ten years, small groups of teacher education students, both graduate and undergraduate, have traveled to a small village in Malawi as part of a one-month study abroad program. The program embraces service learning in a collaborative, international context. The Malawi study abroad program is designed to address seven overarching objectives:

1. Understanding of service-learning, particularly in a developing country,
2. Global awareness & cross-cultural competencies,
3. Leadership skills,
4. Critical thinking and problem solving in diverse settings,
5. Ability to learn from diverse others,
6. Understanding of sustainability,
7. Inquiry about issues surrounding developing countries such as education, poverty, employment, and health (Barber, Jones & Kelly, 2010).

The program showcases a noteworthy historical context, grounding it in service learning. Service learning study abroad often serves as a catalyst to opening opportunities in unexpected ways; hence, we propose a conceptual model as a guiding framework to assist universities and schools involved in a study abroad partnership to plan and implement the most meaningful and growth enhancing experiences possible without dis-empowering the community in the process. While opportunities are endless, service learning study abroad always poses challenges, both for the study abroad institution, as well as the schools and communities with which the study abroad collaborates. We candidly discuss challenges faced in the Malawi Study Abroad program and offer a model for addressing the challenges in productive, meaningful ways to foster “communicative action” (Kihlstrom & Israel, 2002). The chapter concludes with practical advice for creating service learning oriented study abroad experiences in developing countries in ways that can directly influence how future teachers will work with their own parents and school communities at home.

BACKGROUND

Malawi Study Abroad Past and Present

The Malawi Study Abroad program began ten years ago as a collaborative effort between two neighboring institutions of higher education. Program directors had prior experiences in Malawi. Because of its culture of peace, freedom from political strife, and the existence of many needs in the education arena, Malawi seemed to be an excellent location in which to ground the study abroad experience for teacher education students.

The original goal of the study abroad experience was to focus on developing literacy in a school located in the Domasi area of Malawi. The maiden study abroad trip worked to establish a small library in this Domasi-based primary school. Teacher education students contributed to the effort, categorized and organized the books and conducted “library lessons” designed to expose the primary grade students

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