

CRITICAL REFLECTION AND ETHICAL AWARENESS IN STUDY ABROAD: HIGH IMPACT PRACTICES FOR INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how study abroad experiences shape students' intercultural competence, identity, and ethical awareness. While study abroad research has widely examined intercultural competence development, fewer studies explore the ethical and relational dimensions of these experiences. Understanding how students develop ethical awareness and reciprocal relationships during study abroad can provide deeper insight into how intercultural competence is enacted in practice. Our framework is grounded in intercultural competence with an emphasis on competence as a relational and ethical practice rather than a static skill. This study draws on interviews with 28 U.S. university students who completed short-term study abroad programs across diverse global contexts, including Latin America, Asia, and Europe. Utilizing inductive and axial coding, data analysis reveals themes of relational learning, ethical responsibility, and transformation. Experiential, hands-on activities serve as catalysts for students' reflection and personal growth. Ethical responsibility and reciprocity are shown as core dimensions of intercultural learning. Students emphasize respect for host cultures and reported acting as cultural mediators within peer groups. Findings also expose structural inequities limiting access to study abroad. This study reframes intercultural competence as an ethical and relational practice. Finally, we offer strategies for equitable program design and reflection integration and recommendations for expanding access and centering ethical engagement in study abroad.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence, study abroad, ethical awareness, cultural mediation, relational learning.*

1. Introduction

Study abroad programs allow students to be immersed in cultures and languages different from their own. They offer structured programming to guide students through life, study and travel in new places, and often strive to provide experiences through courses, social pairings, and activities that help students reflect on and understand their own beliefs and behaviors as they relate to the host culture (Czerwionka et al., 2015; Jackson, 2011, 2015; Levine & Garland, 2015; Pilon, 2017; Sobkowiak, 2019). Diversity/Global Learning is considered one of the high-impact educational practices (AAC&U, 2024) that promote student engagement and retention among undergraduate students. Studying abroad is widely accepted as an effective way to increase the intercultural competence of its participants. This type of competence has many components of skill, knowledge, beliefs and behavior, and thus has been defined in many ways. According to Beutel and Tangen (2018), "Intercultural competence we take to include elements such as respect and valuing other cultures, openness and curiosity about others as well as cultural self-awareness and adaptability to adjust to new cultural situations" (p. 169). It is generally hypothesized that intercultural competence increases during a study abroad sojourn and can decrease after the passage of time post-study abroad. While different studies may utilize different tools to measure intercultural competence (Fantini, 2009), research into intercultural competence should be multidimensional and multi-perspective, namely using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods (Deardorff, 2006). Of the qualitative methods, the use of interviews is commonly used and cited as among the most valuable approaches for assessing intercultural competence (Deardorff & Deardorff, 2007).

In the present study, we interviewed U.S. university students who participated in either a short-term or long-term study abroad (university-led) program. Our goals for this project were two-fold: to discover what activities and practices students engaged in as part of their study abroad (SA) program led to their perception of increased intercultural competence (as defined above). This discovery is intended to inform recommendations to our university's study abroad office for current and future SA directors.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

We invited 1400 (US undergrad) students who participated in our university SA programs outside of the US from Summer 2023 through Summer 2024. Of these, 77 consented (IRB approval) to participate and 37 chose a time to perform an interview. Although we wished to control for students studying abroad for the first time, we realized we did not have the ability to screen for this, and so we did not exclude potential participants for any reason. However, some students failed to schedule and/or join an interview session, so our final number of interviews was 28, which was close to our original goal of 30. Of our interviewees, 23 had participated in short-term (8 weeks or shorter) SA programs and five had done long-term ones, ranging from 1.3 to 13.4 weeks. Of our participants, a vast majority (82%) identified as female, while the rest as male. SA program locations spanned 16 different countries and programs, with nine students studying in Europe, nine in the British Isles, five in Latin America, four in Asia, and one in Australia. We did not use a questionnaire since we had access to data regarding their programs, in particular the SA location, time, and length, and if the program included a homestay and/or a, language study.

2.2. Data collection

All interviews were held via Zoom with the camera on and were recorded using the Zoom "record" function. Interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and were recorded verbatim for the subsequent transcription purposes. Participants were awarded \$10 spending credit on their university student card for their interview. The transcripts were completed with Cockatoo transcription software and then checked for accuracy by both authors. The interviews were divided among the authors, and a couple interviews were performed by our partner in the Study Abroad office. All three of us asked the same set of questions during the interview in addition to follow-up ones where we were interested in helping our students to unpack the meaning they ascribed to their experiences.

Interview Questions

1. Here is a definition of intercultural competence...
[we pasted in Zoom chat for participant to read]
"Intercultural competence we take to include elements such as respect and valuing other cultures, openness and curiosity about others as well as cultural self-awareness and adaptability to adjust to new cultural situations" (Beutel & Tangen, 2018, p. 169).
...tell us about your study abroad experience and how it relates to that?
Follow-up questions: Which activities did you do that were impactful?
2. If a friend who knows you very well saw you before and after studying abroad, would they notice any changes, and if so, what would they notice?
3. If you had the opportunity to lead a study abroad program, how would you design it/what would it look like? (can add in ... "with the purpose of increasing students' intercultural competence...what would it look like?")
4. If a friend asked if they should study abroad, what would you say?
5. What would you think if the university wanted to make study abroad mandatory?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't discussed yet?

2.3. Analysis

We collected 28 transcripts based on semi-structured questions we asked. We employed thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Firstly, both researchers read the transcripts in their entirety before coding. Next, we started coding each transcript together to ensure inter-rater reliability. We did not send the transcripts to our participants due to a lack of time and access since many graduated by then.

The transcripts were pasted from the Cockatoo software to Microsoft Word documents, one per interview. We listened to the video recordings of the interviews while reading through the transcripts, correcting any transcription errors and ensuring accuracy. While listening and reading the transcript, we looked for content related to the themes we are interested in, embedded in the questions we asked during the interview. We highlighted the relevant sections of the transcript and used the “comments” feature in Word to write an abbreviated term to describe the code of that portion. This resulted in a list of codes that we refined as we listened to transcripts together and separately, comparing our codes to the content they described to ensure we were using them similarly and to reach high inter-rater-reliability. These codes were later examined and categorized through axial coding that resulted in three main themes of our study.

2.4. Limitations to study

We identified two principle limitations to this study. Our recruitment process may have indirectly solicited participants who wanted to talk about their SA experience due to a positive experience during SA, which gives us a limited view to the aspects of SA that encouraged the development of intercultural competence. It is possible that students who did not have a positive SA experience could provide important clues to specific aspects that should be avoided in SA programs or potential negative consequences of aspects that are otherwise perceived as positive. Secondly, we were not able to recruit enough participants from long-term programs to make a comparison between programs. This is due to our university offering much fewer long-term programs than short-term, which is similar to the latest data from 2021-2022 that show summer programs accounted for 49% of all study abroad done by U.S. students (Open Doors Report, 2024).

3. Findings

Thematic analysis revealed three main themes related to the students’ development of intercultural competence – such as relational learning, ethical responsibility, and transformation.

3.1. Relational learning

Relational learning we defined as the acquiring of knowledge or skills through engagement with others. The students we interviewed often responded to our primary question of ‘What activities or experiences impacted your intercultural competence?’ with a variety of relational learning practices. One student described how through storytelling, she gained awareness and understanding of cultural practices and customs when listening to a local talk about their childhood in Ireland. Other students described how participating in traditional rituals, while visiting churches, shrines, and other cultural sites, gave them a deeper insight than they would have learned from a lecture or course. The most cited relational learning practice that students believed impactful was having regular interactions with local people, particularly their peers, or more specifically, on-site college students. Those students whose programs provided this opportunity were systematically mentioned in the interview as the most impactful aspect of their SA program, and students who did not interact with college-student peers on site listed this as one aspect they would add to a (hypothetical) ideal SA program.

3.2. Ethical responsibility

Ethical responsibility is used here in cases where students acted as cultural mediators within peer groups or respected local culture by adjusting behavior or dress to show group awareness of representing their home culture. For example, KJ from a short-term SA program in China, said “So, I think all of us were super conscious of being like...seven random students, but we are like, in a weird way... representing our country.” Ethical responsibility and reciprocity are core dimensions of intercultural learning and include mutual exchange over observation, where students learn with communities, not just about them (Hartman et al., 2018; Tiessen & Huish, 2014). In this sense there is an overlap with relational learning, as well as critical reflection, social awareness and environmental understanding. A comprehensive example of this awareness was shared by KL, who participated in a very short (less than 2 week) SA program in the Dominican Republic,

...it was a very contrasting culture from what we grow up with here, which was at first it was a little, it wasn't uncomfortable, but it was just shocking in a lot of ways. Also they have some sanitary, like the garbage, there's a bit of a garbage issue in Dominican for our public. And instead of...having that be a negative factor of it, we looked at how this could improve in the future...So it was a lot of how we can intersect our cultures for the public good and how to take away some of their culture aspects and apply it to our own. So it was a really cool experience where we got to adjust pretty quickly since we were only there for

nine days, and learn to take what we saw over there, apply that to our lives, and also see how our lives apply to overseas in that country.

3.3. Transformation

Transformation as we defined is the perception or observation of having changed in behavior, belief, attitude, preference, and other affectual manifestations, and indicates the development of intercultural competence. All students described some type of change they observed in themselves, whether it was outwardly visible or not. Many students mentioned an increased interest and curiosity in the host culture and in foreign countries, culture, and travel in general. Some students shared that they gained a new appreciation for studying the culture formally and one decided to minor in Latin American and Caribbean studies after her study abroad in the Dominican Republic. A comprehensive transformation occurred for BK during a short-term SA program in Italy, “So, during my trip, I decided to convert to Catholicism, which was a big step for me, but we went to several churches and just getting that experience and talking with Italian priests and asking questions about Catholicism really opened my eyes to that.” Other students described new beliefs and awareness of ethical responsibility resulting in their transformation,

I mentioned earlier how I noticed now how what we do in the U.S. affects the rest of the world and how what the rest of the world does also affects the U.S. I think having more of that global perspective and awareness of how what we do, just in general, as people, what we do makes a difference and impacts other people. We don't live in, I guess, a silo. Like, everything that we do affects other people. So, I guess that's a new perspective (AL, Belgium)

4. Implications

Considering these findings, we present some strategies for equitable program design. The first of these is integrating reflection into study abroad programs. Students reported feeling more present due to regular reflection activities, such as a daily journal entry or a similar method. Journaling helped students become aware of their own adaptations and new lifestyle habits they were forming during SA. Journaling also allowed students to become more aware of cultural differences and similarities they perceived during SA. Furthermore, our findings led to recommendations for expanding access and centering ethical engagement in study abroad. Our interviewees mentioned cost as prohibitive to accessing SA for most students. In fact, when asked, “Should SA be made mandatory?”, students consistently replied positively; however, that cost was the primary limiting factor for a student to participate in SA. This hypothetical topic led to unexpected and contradictory expressions that SA is beneficial for everyone to expand their perspectives and understanding of other cultures, as well as that SA is made more ‘special’ by being exclusively accessible to few people. While students were enthusiastically recommending SA to their friends and ‘everyone they meet’, they were possessive of their privilege to participate in it. While cost remains a persistent equity barrier, other ways students cited to improve access to SA were to offer pre-departure preparation on cultural norms, to ensure alignment between course study and host culture/place, and to provide post-departure opportunities for students to close the loop and reconcile ideas they might be grappling with.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the growing body of research on study abroad by highlighting the relational and ethical dimensions of intercultural competence development. Through qualitative interviews with students who participated in university-led study abroad programs, we identified three interconnected themes—relational learning, ethical responsibility, and personal transformation—that shaped students’ perceptions of intercultural growth. Our findings suggest that intercultural competence is not only a set of cognitive skills or cultural knowledge but also a relational practice developed through meaningful interactions with local communities and reflection on one’s role within those relationships.

Students emphasized that interactions with local peers, participation in cultural practices, and guided reflection activities were among the most impactful elements of their study abroad experiences. These interactions prompted students to become more aware of their cultural assumptions and the ethical implications of representing their home culture abroad. In this sense, the findings align with process-oriented models of intercultural competence, such as those proposed by Deardorff (2006) and Byram (2008), which conceptualize intercultural competence as an ongoing developmental process grounded in attitudes of openness, respect, and critical cultural awareness.

At the same time, participants highlighted structural barriers to participation, particularly the financial cost of study abroad programs. These findings emphasize the need for institutions to expand equitable access while maintaining program structures that support meaningful intercultural engagement. SA programs that intentionally incorporate relational learning opportunities, structured reflection, and ethical engagement may better support students' development of intercultural competence. Future research could explore how these relational and ethical dimensions develop across different program lengths and cultural contexts, as well as how study abroad experiences influence

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