

Transformative Learning through Short-term Study Abroad Programs

TSU-MING CHIANG
Georgia College & State University

JENQ-FOUNG YAO
Georgia College & State University

Abstract

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected in the 21st century, it is crucial to teach college students how to acquire cultural competence as global citizens. Learning through study abroad involves total immersion and active engagement in understanding other cultures and people. It challenges individuals' ethnocentric beliefs and habitual frames of reference to foster inclusive and global perspectives as transformative learners. Furthermore, even in short-term study abroad programs, through intentional planning, faculty may embed multiple high impact educational learning experiences in their courses. Collaboration with a foreign university can further enhance students' cultural knowledge by creating peer interactions in and outside of classes. The specifics of peer interactions are described later in this paper. This teaching note introduces a teaching pedagogy as well as strategies of mentoring undergraduate research through study abroad classes. Students gain both research skills and cultural competence as learning outcomes which are two of the ultimate goals in higher education. Key areas include:

- *Teaching pedagogy through designing faculty-led short-term study abroad programs*
- *Combine multiple high impact practices in undergraduate research, study abroad and peer-mentoring.*
- *Transformation through the impacts on faculty and students.*

Keywords: study abroad, undergraduate research, transformative learning, high-impact practice, teaching pedagogy

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected in the 21st century, it is crucial to teach college students how to acquire cultural competence as global citizens. Learning through study abroad involves total immersion and active engagement in understanding other cultures and people. It challenges individuals' ethnocentric beliefs and habitual frames of reference to foster inclusive and global perspectives as transformative learners (Mezirow, 1997). Furthermore, even in short-term study abroad programs, through intentional planning, faculty may embed multiple high impact educational learning experiences in their courses. Collaboration with a foreign university can further enhance students' cultural knowledge by creating peer interactions in and outside of classes. We describe specifics of peer interactions later in this paper. This teaching note introduces a teaching pedagogy and strategies of mentoring undergraduate research through study abroad classes.

A growing student population from diverse backgrounds requires skills for intercultural competence for effective communication and collaboration (He, Lundgren & Pynes, 2017). Understanding and appreciating other cultures are essential in developing intercultural competence (Schmidmeier, et al. 2020). The key to effective communication and interactions is understanding other

cultures. The concept of culture is complex. In this paper, the authors referred to culture as the “values, customs, beliefs, and symbolic practices by which men and women live or the whole way of life” (Eagleton, 2016, p. 1). They are also “patterns of shared values and beliefs that over time produce behavioral norms” (Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, culture is a set of beliefs and assumptions that people share to interpret the world around them and decide how to behave and interact with others. In higher education, bringing students from different cultures together to interact with each other is the best process for developing intercultural competence (Deardroff, 2011). More than ever, the world requires its citizens and leaders to look beyond their national borders to cooperate and collaborate on solving global issues. Students who participated in study abroad programs and other high impact practices have reported significantly higher multicultural competence (Soria & Johnson, 2017, Earnest, Rosenbusch, Wallace-Williams, & Keim 2016). Exposure to cross-cultural knowledge enables learners to be global citizens who appreciate different cultures with a high level of understanding and sensitivity. Sanchez (2012) suggests combining international travel, undergraduate research, and intense interactions between faculty and student researchers to create a high impact learning experience of lifetime. The exciting news for educators is that the acquisition of cultural competence is sustained beyond the conclusion of the study abroad program (Roller & Ballestas, 2017). Therefore, the teaching pedagogy that supports study abroad is also supported by the Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997, Laros, Fuhr, & Taylor, 2017, Cranton, 2006, Dirkx, 1998; Landry-Meyer, Bae, Zibbel, Peet, & Wooldridge, 2019) and further empirical literature (Christie, Carey, Robertson, & Grainger 2015; Gambino & Hashim, 2016; Coker, Heiser, Taylor, & Book, 2017; Walters, Charles, & Bingham, 2017; Strange & Gibson, 2017; Valera, 2017; Walsh & Walsh, 2018).

To create transformative learning experiences, course selection is the first step when planning for a meaningful short-term, summer study abroad program with an undergraduate research component. Faculty leading the programs should also be mindful of the integrity of the academic work. Not all courses are deliverable in a short-term study abroad tour of four to five weeks. It is especially challenging for the courses that require a longer and more gradual skill-building process. Therefore, in our study abroad program, the courses are topic-driven with cultural learning as an emphasis. For example, two courses offered in psychology are Cultural Influences on Developing Individuals and Interpersonal Relations across Cultures. In Computer Science, a course Global Perspective in Big Data and Technology allows students from various disciplines to look into how to use big data in their respective fields in different countries. Consider how to infuse cultural learning through faculty’s expertise and research areas in course building is a good start.

The next step is to determine how to integrate potential research skills and knowledge in course contents and requirements. Students can collect data through field trips or lab site visits as they completing their research assignments. To expand transformative learning opportunities, it is essential to balance the classroom time abroad in preparing learners to connect contents with cultural knowledge, and in collecting research data with field trips or site visits. It is highly recommended to reach out to universities near the study abroad site as resources. In our faculty-led short-term summer study abroad program, a strong collaboration with a university was first established. American students were each paired with a local university student as their learning buddies. It brings students from two countries in discussing and exchanging cultural perspectives. In one class, the American students joined a similar topic course in discussing elderly care in the respective country. They were able to receive immediate feedback and clarification to foster deeper cultural knowledge and experiences. The benefit was mutual for students from both countries. This peer interaction is unique to our study abroad program. Before designing a self-led study abroad program, the authors have participated in many other collaborative study abroad programs hosted by multiple universities. We found many students often continue holding ethnocentric perspectives despite they have cultural learning from readings and field trips in those collaborative study abroad programs without peer interactions. Personal contacts in exposure to peers and close examination of cultural influences through the research process are critical in building cultural competence. Without them, students often learn from instructors and continue to use the ethnocentric lens to process cultural information. Therefore, to provide transformative learning, it is essential to challenge

students through critical thinking, data analyses, peer interactions, and continuous self-reflection. This process further facilitates self-reflective learning through “*meaning transformation*” which is where the transformative learning occurs (Kitchenham, 2008).

In designing a short-term (four to six weeks) study abroad program, frontloading readings before departure also helps to prepare learners in thinking and to design their research projects. Before embarking on the study abroad trip, students can finish reading and decide on a topic and complete literature research. Therefore, during the study abroad classes, faculty can spend more time in relating the contents to student research and how to collect the cultural data to examine the topics.

The steps in creating transformative learning in study abroad are summarized below.

- Course selection and planning – in a short-term study abroad program, the courses should not be content-heavy in a way that requires a long process in building basic skills. Students should have acquired basic research skills as pre-requisite.
- Clear learning outcomes and objectives – integrate research components in course requirements that include a final paper and presentation. A journal entry or self-reflection assignments to document cultural challenges and experiences are good to include. It enables students to reflect on their individual growth and to facilitate meaning transformation.
- Front-load course readings when possible and allow closure (e.g., final paper and reflection) when returning to home campus through digital submissions.
- Field trip design – embed data collection in each field trip, such as note-taking or similar forms. It allows students to actively engage in searching and analyzing cultural information in an intentional process, instead of simply a cultural tour.
- Closure – the final part of the study abroad program consists of students presenting their research results and sharing their findings with the class.

In summary, it is valuable to combine two transformative learning experiences by embedding undergraduate research in the study abroad programs as a teaching pedagogy. Infusing undergraduate research pedagogy into study abroad courses also involves two high impact educational practices as outlined by Associations of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2008). Students gain both research skills and cultural competence as learning outcomes. With meticulous planning and collaboration with universities abroad, faculty members can embed undergraduate research experiences into field trips and site visits with a guided set of scientific inquiries. Pairing students in two countries in peer interactions adds further cultural benefits. The authors have successfully practiced this teaching method in seven different countries for four- to five-week summer study abroad programs in the past ten years. Students who participated in these programs have taken these undergraduate research skills and cultural competence into their further education and careers, which is the ultimate goal in higher education.

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Author's Note: Tsu-Ming Chiang is a professor of psychology at the Georgia College & State University. Jenq-Foung Yao is a professor of computer science at the Georgia College & State University.

Citation: Chiang, T. M. & Yao, J. F. (2020). Transformative learning through short-term study abroad programs. *Journal of Transformative Learning, (7)*1, 3-7.