

The pedagogy of Short-Term Study-Abroad Programs

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on establishing guidelines on the pedagogy of short term study abroad programs. This study follows 33 students who participated in a short-term study-abroad program to India with the researcher from 2006 through 2011. The study relies heavily on the student reflections and expressions as they experienced them. It is qualitative in nature. Focus groups were the main method of data collection, where participants were invited to reflect, express, and share their experiences with one another. This provided an opportunity for the participants to come together, relive their experiences, and help provide information as to how and what type of an influence this short-term study-abroad program provided.

Short-term study-abroad programs have been difficult to define; however, there is a universal acceptance that they include certain characteristics such as a duration of less than one month, field expertise and knowledge of the culture and society of the country that is being visited by the lead faculty member, and student immersion into the culture that results in a gainful learning experience. Critical thinking and inquiry attitude are essential components of this experience. Short-term programs are increasing in popularity for many reasons: they are generally more affordable than longer programs, they appeal to students who may be unwilling or unable to commit to a semester or a year abroad, and they allow students in structured academic programs of many disciplines, including social work, to gain experience that enhances their understanding of the profession in a global context.

Study Abroad Programs in Social Work

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has begun to focus heavily on the inclusion of global content into the social work curriculum. Recent issues of its *Journal of Social Work Education* have included exclusive articles on global social work practice by various research scholars. In addition, the CSWE created specific guidelines for educators who are interested in developing a global experience for their students, including the identification of seven types of study-abroad programs within the social work profession: academic courses abroad, practicum abroad, optional practicum abroad, international service-learning projects, international internships, independent learning abroad, and group study abroad (CSWE Council on Global Learning, Research, and Practice, 2010). An overview of this last type,

Group study abroad is designed to broaden and/or deepen the social work knowledge, skills and/or values of the participants through exposure to social issues, policies and practices within a foreign cultural context. Group study abroad is directed and facilitated by faculty who identify learning objectives, determine competencies to be achieved by the students, design the study abroad curriculum and accompany the program participants. (p. 6)

Group study-abroad programs can also fall under a category called short-term study-abroad programs. In examining the conceptual definitions of study-abroad programs, almost all institutions define short-term programs as no longer than a semester or a quarter, but there is a great deal of variation within the short-term category. Short-term programs can range from weeklong programs conducted during spring break in conjunction with a single course to three- or four-week programs conducted during the winter or summer breaks to longer programs of up to eight weeks. Most short-term programs involve home stays, travel to multiple sites, and service or research experiences.

This article presents a short-term study-abroad program that the researcher and undergraduate and graduate students from various disciplines participated in during the 2006–2007 and 2008–2009 winter

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breaks and during the 2011 spring break. The research question associated with the program was: How effective can short term study abroad programs be and what are the best practices of short term study abroad programs?

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Elicit observations on the various study tours in which social work students have engaged
- Gather information on the first-time program experience and why each student participated in the trip
- Collect information on students' second program experience, if applicable
- Record the level of change and impact the trip had on each student
- Seek information from participants on the positives and negatives of the short term study abroad programs and how to improve it
- Offer suggestions and recommendations based on the findings

The rising increase in globalization at the end of the twentieth century created a need for and encouraged greater numbers of students from more diverse backgrounds and fields of study to go abroad. Social work as a discipline found itself at a similar crossroads as it began to see the need for global social work practice both domestically and internationally. However, not all students desired or were able to dedicate a year, or even a semester, to an in-depth experience abroad. As a result, higher education institutions—and for-profit companies—began offering shorter-term programs that appealed to greater numbers of students. Many institutions realized that opportunities were needed for social work students to learn in a global environment in order to meet the challenges of the profession's work.

Short-term study-abroad programs have become more viable and affordable for students, and faculty now have a better grasp of maintaining and meeting the learning outcomes. However, there is still debate over whether a week or a month or six weeks is good enough to determine that students have achieved the core competency practice behaviors, especially in such areas as cultural competencies. One study, which surveyed more than six thousand alumni from twenty universities who participated in study abroad over a period of fifty years, presented evidence that duration of stay is insignificant in terms of the degree to which students who study abroad are globally engaged (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic, & Jon, 2009). The researchers found no significant difference in global engagement—defined for the study as degree of international and domestic civic commitment and volunteerism—between students who had studied abroad for longer or shorter time periods. Most of the respondents, however, reported their global engagement stemmed from their time abroad (Paige et al., 2009).

Methodology

Participants

The study followed 33 students from 2006 through 2011 (n=33). Students came from two institutions, a public college in Massachusetts and a private Catholic university in Pennsylvania. Students participated in a trip to India with the researcher as the lead faculty member. The trip was one to two weeks long and was conducted during the winter and spring breaks. Upon completion of the trip, students were expected to turn in a copy of their daily journal recordings and write a 15-page graded reflection paper that was kept as part of the study. In addition to these requirements, graduate students were also expected to research a topic of interest. Focus groups were conducted one year after the conclusion of the trip. The purpose was to allow them to meet, discuss, and recall the trip and examine how it changed the way they work with their clients as well as its effect on broader changes to their careers. In addition, the focus group discussions were targeted to the study objectives. These groups were held in a friendly environment at an Indian restaurant.

Findings

General Program Benefits

Students expressed a great appreciation for the invitation to participate in the focus groups. The general program findings are as follows:

- The highly structured program, which required ongoing reflection and included in-depth experience working or studying with host-country participants, was considered most important by all participants.

- Safety was cited as a concern by all participants before the trip; however, they agreed that, upon return, they had been relieved of that anxiety. Relatedly, for those who participated in second and third tours, the ability to bring a cell phone was a great relief to them and their families.
- Although all participants believed they were adequately prepared for the trip, they felt that more information should be imparted before the trip. Most suggestions were of a practical nature and included a clearer understanding of money exchange and currency value, pictures of the transportation and housing that would be available in the host country, visa requirements and timelines, and guidelines for attire in relation to the weather and to visiting temples.
- Seventy-eight percent of participants welcomed the idea of an overnight stay at a peer's house in the host country, also known as a home stay opportunity.
- All participants acknowledged that having a faculty member participate in the program who was familiar with the country was vital to the trip and its success due to the in-depth support—not a tourist type of learning—that was provided.
- All felt strongly that higher education institutions that offer global travel experiences should provide short-term internal experiences similar to the program in which they participated.
- The group meetings that were held each morning and evening were deemed beneficial by all participants as they provided an opportunity to discuss feelings and observations and to receive cultural sensitization.

Student reflections reinforce these focus group findings and speak to the benefits of study-abroad programs:

- *Rachel*: “The study abroad trip was beyond the quality of a course offered on campus. Every activity was tied to my discipline and practice.”
- *Jhoel*: “The most affective learning of global impact was when we travelled from Chennai to Cochin on December 30, 2006, the day Saddam Hussain was hanged. We were looked at as criminals and ruthless people by our fellow passengers and this created in all of the students a level of anxiety over our safety until our professor explained and debriefed us about how we are perceived as Americans. This brings us to an important role the instructor plays in short-term study abroad programs. The instructor is 24/7 with the students and needs to constantly check in with the students as to how they are feeling and how their experiences have been.”
- *Colleen*: “Going to India has been something I've always wanted to do and this experience was one that I will never forget. There were ups and downs, good and bad memories, but when all is said and done I would do the trip again in a heartbeat. It was an experience that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I think that being the first group, we lucked out in regard to the people that came because most of us knew each other for a period of time and that provided comfort.”

Many students indicated that spending the entire program in one locality would have helped a great deal with physical discomforts such as jetlag but that traveling helped them quickly learn about the great diversity in India. In order to fully grasp the depth and breadth of the country's diversity, and to gain as much value from the program as possible, it is necessary for students to ask questions as they arise and to complete the readings associated with the trip.

According to many participants, the infusion of educational experiences with their host-country peers helped them comprehend and assimilate the cultural dimension of the country. To many, the most important learning aspect was meeting and talking to village folks in India. “Programs abroad that mostly involve traveling by coach between historic sites may allow students to see a greater amount of the host country, but offer much less in terms of engaging educational experiences,” according to Dawn, a non-matriculating student who had been to many countries prior to this trip. She also stated that a benefit of the program was that they had time to reflect and were helped by the faculty member with regard to briefings and group sessions.

One participant noted how helpful it was to meet students from Fatima College in Madurai, a non-urbanized city in southern India. Getting to know the role and effect of family on these people's lives was an eye-opener to many students and questions over independence and dependence arose in the group discussions. To one participant, Colleen, it was a surprise to learn that a girl at Fatima College expressed that she would be killed by her father if she was in love with a boy: “The concept of arranged marriage and the role a father played in raising his children was really something that opened me up to the positives of parental influence,

protection and delayed independence.” Carol expressed that she had been on many trips and on all of them the only local residents the students got to know were the bus driver and the guide.

One finding of note was the participants’ interest in learning basic polite phrases in the local language such as *Nandiree* (thank you) and *Vanakam*(good morning). According to all participants, the most important observation they made was the nonverbal communication the Indian people used in conjunction with their attentive listening that is represented by nodding their heads as the other speaks:“It was really nice to see that people in India use facial expressions in public to communicate.”

Changes in Life and Attitude

According to Amanda, the study-abroad experience helped her make several life changes. She learned from the visit to “Little Drops,” a home for semi-orphans, that you need to be comfortable with the uncomfortable in order to enjoy and be contented with life. As a result of this, she made changes such as leaving her boyfriend—a relationship she thought she was comfortable with because she needed him in her life—and a job with which she was not truly satisfied. She realized that she was not filling her own cup, relying instead on others to do so, and that she needed to do things for herself and stop allowing others to help her feel better.

Returning Students

One feature of the short-term study-abroad experience was the reentry of three students to the program one year later. Amy’s return to India was a result of the first study-abroad program. She is now working with a non-profit organization that is focused on addressing global poverty. Participants shared that the purpose of their professional practice has moved from questions to exploration. More than 60% of respondents noted that they had since traveled to many other countries, something they directly attributed to their first trip to India. One student stated that fear of leaving her home country created anxiety about going abroad, but the trip to India clearly provided a path to enjoyable traveling outside one’s comfort zone.

In addition, several participants connected with students in the host country and are now collaborating with social workers in India to answer social issues through global engagement.

One of the essential aspects of the experience was that the instructor had more control over student activities, and thus their learning on the trip was equal to, if not greater than, the learning experiences found in the traditional longer programs. Other aspects that the students felt helped them were the instructor’s sense of humor and understanding. All students agreed that the opportunities to opt out of an activity due to fatigue or other reasons such as lack of comfort were needed on a trip like this as the culture shock was huge and not everyone processes it in the same way.

Short-term study-abroad programs help students go beyond their comfort zones and make necessary changes in their lives to adapt to difficult situations. Based on the students’ focus group feedback and their reflection journals, I recommend the following to create a carefully guided program that will help students grow and mature throughout the experience.

- Short-term programs must be wellplanned, with strong, clear academic content. Many programs often fail because they lack sufficient academic material.
- Ensure that the local community is integrated into the learning experience by including a visit with the village head and groups and by bringing in guest lecturers from the local communities.
- Invite peers from the same discipline in the host country to interact with the students. Nothing compares to the learning that is gained from peers in other countries.
- Above all, stay in tune and in touch with the students day in and day out.

Conclusion

The following is a journal reflection from Melissa, a participant in the first trip to India:

Professor; you are an amazing leader with a great sense of humor who alleviated our stress and stayed calm when we weren’t. You were a best friend, mentor, and guide that anyone could ask for. You provided us with all our needs (and there were many more!) and made us feel safe and protected. I know the trip was very tiresome for you, as it was for us, but it served as an invaluable experience. I hope you find the energy to do it again in the future.

What Melissa said was true. I felt like I was hit by a sledgehammer upon my return to the United States in 2007 after my first trip with students to India, and I swore I would not put the effort into this type of an exercise again in the future. However, since then I have brought more than 40 students on four different short-term study-abroad programs to India and Chile, and although the experience is always overwhelming it is always worthwhile.

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